

S/12615 Private James Alexander Learmonth

S/12618 Private James Simison



Both men served in 7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders, in the 26th Brigade of 9th (Scottish) Division. James Learmonth was born on 1st February 1897, at Hermisgarth, Burness parish, on Sanday. His parents were John Learmonth, a farm servant, and Mary Learmonth (née Alexander). The family moved to Rousay in 1906, then soon after to Kirkwall, where John ran a small haulage business (that prospered during the war) and James completed his schooling.

James Simison was born on 25th September 1896, at 16 Shore Street, Kirkwall. His



parents were James Simison, a merchant seaman, and Elizabeth Simison (née Deldie).

From May 1916, 9th Division included a South African Infantry Brigade, which attacked on its left on 12th October, while 7th Seaforth lead the attack on its right on the Butte de Warlencourt, an old burial mound about fifty feet (15 metres) high. Heavy German machine gun and rifle fire shot down many Seaforths as they advanced up a gentle slope in a drizzle of rain, but others were killed and wounded by “friendly fire”, because the British heavy artillery often fired “short”.

Two supporting companies of 10th Argylls pushed forward and a mixed party of Seaforths and Argylls dug in on a line about 150 yards beyond their original front line. South African 2nd Regiment, followed by the 4th, had lost direction in smoke drifting from the Butte and also lost heavily from machine gun fire, the survivors dug in about halfway to Snag Trench.

General Furse, 9th Division’s commander, had protested strongly to his higher commanders that preparations for the attack had been rushed and it should be postponed for a couple of days, to give his infantry and gunners the opportunity to accurately locate the enemy positions and their own. If his request had been approved, it would have given the artillery observation officers time to locate and identify some of the many scratches of trenches which were not marked on the map and thus avoided some of the heavy shells landing on the advancing Scots.

Neither James’s body was found and identified after the attack, so they are two of seven Orcadians from 7th Seaforth who died at the Butte and are commemorated on Panel 15C of the Thiepval Memorial to the Somme missing. On Panel 4C is the name of Orcadian William Porteous of 4th South African Regiment. James Learmonth died only 19 years old, James Simison a year older.

The impressive Thiepval Memorial was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, is 141 feet (45 metres) high and contains the names of 73,357 British and 858 South African men (other Commonwealth Somme missing are commemorated elsewhere), who have no known grave and fell on the Somme between July 1915 and 20th March 1918. A new visitor centre close to the Memorial was officially opened by the Duke of Kent on 27th September 2004.

The bodies of four Orcadians, Seaforth Highlanders Lance-Corporal Alfred Gibson, Privates George Harvey, William Miller and Samuel Wylie, were identified and buried in marked graves in Warlencourt Cemetery. Three others, Seaforth Highlanders Privates John Harcus, James Tait and John Drever, later died in a casualty clearing station or hospital of wounds received at the Butte. The failed attack by 7th Seaforth Highlanders on the Butte de Warlencourt on 12th October 1916 was the most costly battalion action of the Great War, in Orcadian fatal casualties.