

## S/12630 Private William Cursiter



William was born at Gayfield Cottage, Papa Westray on 5<sup>th</sup> January 1897, the first son of Seaman James Cursiter and Tomina Cursiter (née Rendall). James took a job ashore with the railway as a dock gateman, so William and younger brother Thomas finished their schooling at Methil in Fife.

William enlisted under the Derby Scheme on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1915 into the Seaforth Highlanders. When called up in April 1916 he travelled to Fort George to join the Seaforth Highlanders. William probably trained at Cromarty in 3rd Seaforths, which also provided guards for the naval base there. William crossed to France, probably in August with many other Orcadians, and after a couple of weeks training at a base depot joined the 7th Battalion of the Seaforths, in 26th Brigade of 9th (Scottish) Division. 7th Seaforths had lost 450 casualties fighting at Longueval and Delville Wood on 14<sup>th</sup>–23<sup>rd</sup> July 1916 in the early phase of the Battle of the Somme.

9th Division returned to the Somme fighting in September. From May 1916, 9th Division included a South African Infantry Brigade, which attacked on its left on 12<sup>th</sup> October, while 7th Seaforths 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 of the Seaforths as they advanced up a gentle slope in a drizzle of rain. The confused nature of the fighting, from shallow trenches not all known and marked up on the maps passed to the artillery, resulted in some of the Seaforths being killed and wounded by “friendly fire”, because some of the British heavy artillery shells were 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.

Seven Orcadians from 7th Seaforths who died at the Butte are commemorated on Panel 15C of the Thiepval Memorial to the Somme missing. On Panel 4C is the name of Orcadian William Porteous of Stromness and 4th South African Regiment, who also died at the Butte on 12<sup>th</sup> October.

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 12<sup>th</sup> October 1916 was the most costly battalion action of the Great War, in Orcadian fatal casualties.

William was seriously wounded and lay on the battlefield until at least the next day, possibly for several. When eventually recovered from there, his right leg had become infected. He spent months recovering in Erskine Hospital near Edinburgh, enduring three amputations which eventually left a stump a few inches below his thigh. He was invalided out of the Army on 28<sup>th</sup> May 1917. William received medals and a Silver War Badge from the British Army, but also a specially made bronze war token from the residents of Papa Westray, to show their appreciation of his war sacrifice.

Despite his ordeal and disability, William’s family never heard him complain. He probably considered himself *relatively* fortunate, compared to his many Orcadian friends in 7th Seaforths who did not survive the attack on 12<sup>th</sup> October 1916 at the Butte de Warlencourt. William Cursiter did not marry and died from cancer at Ellenfield Farm, Tankerness on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1960, aged 63.