

## 135762 Private Charles Kirkness



Charles was born at Hammerclett, Skeabrae, Sandwick on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1891, the third son of farmer Peter Kirkness and Margaret Ann Kirkness (née Kirkness). Charles had four brothers, with only the youngest sibling a girl, also called Margaret Ann. Charles was working as a ploughman for Thomas Wylie at Swartland, Sandwick when the 1911 Census was taken. His older brother Peter had sailed from Glasgow to Quebec in the summer of 1908 and settled in Toronto. On 1<sup>st</sup> June 1912 Charles and his eldest brother John left Glasgow on the Donaldson Brothers' steamer *Letitia*, bound for Quebec and Montreal. Charles settled in Toronto and worked as a labourer for the city council's Commission of Works.

After completing a medical the day before, on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1915 Charles enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force and joined the 74th Battalion, which was the sixth raised for overseas service in the city of Toronto. After two months of basic training, Charles joined a reinforcement draft and sailed on 1<sup>st</sup> October from Montreal on the Allan Line steamer *Scandinavian*. When he arrived in England on 3<sup>rd</sup> November, Charles joined 36th Battalion, CEF in West Sandling Camp, near Folkestone.

After another three months training, Charles embarked for France on 19<sup>th</sup> February 1916. On arrival there he was assigned to 19th Battalion, CEF, which was the second infantry battalion raised in Toronto and had crossed to France as part of 2nd Canadian Division in September 1915. When Charles joined 19th Battalion in the field in a 29-strong reinforcement draft on 11<sup>th</sup> March, it was in trenches a couple of miles south of Ypres in Flanders.

After a relatively "quiet" introduction to trench warfare for Charles during the spring and early summer months which 19th Battalion spent in the Ypres Salient, on 24<sup>th</sup> August 19th Battalion started a week-long march to a training area near Hazebrouck in northern France. After four days' training in musketry, bombing, trench attack, section, platoon and company drills, 19th Battalion started another march to reach Albert on 9<sup>th</sup> September and take its turn in the cauldron of the Battle of the Somme.

The Canadian Corps, consisting of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions, relieved on the Somme battlefield in mid-September the Australians, who had lost over 23,000 casualties fighting at Pozières and Mouquet Farm. The Canadians prepared to join the third major attack in the Battle of the Somme, the Battle of Flers-Courcelette which was launched on 15<sup>th</sup> September with the first use of tanks. 19th Battalion's War Diary gives an estimate for its casualties on 15<sup>th</sup> September as 256 all ranks.

The seven Orcadians who died in three weeks of heavy fighting by the Canadians to grind out an advance to take and hold the village of Courcelette included James Harvey of Sandwick, a first cousin of Charles Kirkness. Charles survived the ordeal physically intact, but it must have taken a mental toll. 19th Battalion lost another 103 battle casualties between 25<sup>th</sup> September and 3<sup>rd</sup> October, also 29 sick.

On the night of 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> October 3rd Canadian Division relieved on the Somme battlefield the exhausted 2nd Canadian Division. 19th Battalion enjoyed a few days' rest, before travelling south to join First Army. 2nd Canadian Division took over the right of First Army's line, west of the town of Lens.

2nd Canadian Division spent another relatively "quiet" spell of trench warfare during the winter of 1916-17, when 19th Battalion alternated between spells in the front, support and reserve lines. On 7<sup>th</sup> January 1917 the 19th Battalion relieved 21st Battalion at Calonne to start a tour in the front line trenches which lasted until the 19<sup>th</sup>. The War Diary records that on 12<sup>th</sup> January 19th Battalion had four men wounded and one, Acting Lance Corporal C. Kirkness, was killed. Charles Kirkness died aged 26 and he was buried in Grave I.C.4 in the British Army extension to the nearby French cemetery in the village of Bully-Grenay.