

Lieutenant Frederick Neal Robertson



Frederick was born at Wyng, Walls on 6th January 1889, the fourth son of farmer George Robertson and Jeannie Robertson (née Groat). Frederick was educated at Walls Public School and Thomson's Civil Service College in Aberdeen.

Frederick was working as a Customs Officer in Lerwick, staying in St. Olaf Street there, when he enrolled into one of the Shetland Territorial Companies of the Gordon Highlanders on 1st December 1913, aged 24 years and 11 months. Frederick was embodied into the Gordons on 5th August 1914, when war broke out. He was serving in 202nd Provisional (T.F.) Battalion at Seafield, Greenock when signed an agreement to serve overseas on 26th January 1916.

On 6th March Frederick applied to serve as an officer cadet in 3/7th Gordon Highlanders. He was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant (on probation) and joined 4th Reserve Battalion, Gordons on 26th September.

Frederick arrived in France on 27th October and joined 1/4th Gordons, in 154th Brigade of the 51st (Highland) Division. After difficult and costly failures to capture High Wood in the summer, it had returned to the Battle of the Somme to attack the even more formidable ruined village of Beaumont Hamel. After thorough preparation (including realistic rehearsals) and several postponements because of poor weather, the Highland Division assaulted Beaumont Hamel on 13th November.

As a newly-arrived officer with no combat experience, Frederick was likely allocated an observer or administrative role (possibly in the 10% personnel left out-of-action) in the attack on Beaumont Hamel. However, he would have shared in the satisfaction that the Highlanders felt when they succeeded, in a notable feat that became the foundation of a growing fighting reputation.

51st Division had a short rest, before returning to take over the nearby Courcelette sector, captured at heavy cost by the Canadians. Frederick had to learn to look after the health and welfare of his soldiers in difficult winter conditions. Almost daily rainfall combined with heavy shell-fire damage to disintegrate the battlefield into deep, clinging mud. The troops lived in shell-hole posts in the front line, many suffering from trench feet, frostbite and dysentery. Morale of those not sick had slumped, when 2nd Division took over the sector on 12th January 1917.

The Highlanders spent three weeks on the coast near Abbeville, at the mouth of the River Somme, for a period of rest and training, before moving north to Third Army area for the Battle of Arras. 1/4th Gordons lost 174 casualties in the Highlanders' opening advance on 9th April, which was spoilt when 1/7th Argylls on the Gordons' right lost direction. The two battalions advanced together again on 23rd April to capture the village of Roeux and enter the nearby Chemical Works, but the Germans there held out and the Gordons lost another 325 casualties. The Chemical Works changed hands several times over the following month. Hostile shelling of Crump Trench, near Roeux, on 20th May killed a Gordon Highlander, also wounded 2/Lieutenant F.N. Robertson and three others.

Frederick's shrapnel wounds to the right lumbar region and right side of his neck were not serious, but he embarked at Calais on 22nd May. He arrived in Dover on the same day and was admitted to 2nd Western General Hospital, Manchester on the 24th for treatment. On 4th June his wounds were classed "as superficial, requiring about two weeks to heal" and Frederick was granted three weeks leave. During it Frederick married in Romsey, Hampshire, Beatrice Clara Coombs, the daughter of a motor and cycle engineer. A Medical Board on 14th August found that Frederick's wounds had healed well and recommended that he report to Brocton Camp, Stafford.

Frederick re-joined 1/4th Gordons in France during the Battle of Passchendaele. He survived the fighting there and at Cambrai in November. When 51st Division was heavily attacked on 21st March 1918 in the first German Spring Offensive, 1/4th Gordons lost over 400 casualties in a 15-mile fighting retreat ending on the 26th.

51st Division was close behind the front line when the second German offensive, towards the River Lys along the French-Belgian border, struck on 9th April. When 1/4th Gordons moved up to join the fighting in the early morning of the 11th, its War Diary records that Lieutenant F. N. Robertson was wounded and went missing leading, and then rallying under heavy machine-gun fire, his platoon in an attack near Béthune.

Frederick's family in Orkney and wife in Hampshire probably clung to the hope that he had been taken prisoner wounded. However, his death was officially accepted after Corporal James Milne, who knew Frederick, reported on 22nd January 1919 that he had seen Frederick dead on 11th April. Frederick Robertson is commemorated on Panel 115 of the Loos Memorial, in Dud Corner Cemetery in France and also on the Walls Memorial in Orkney.