7th Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders (in 9th Division) attacked the Butte de Warlencourt, in the northern part of the Somme battlefield, on Thursday, 12th October 1916. It was one of Orkney’s saddest days of the war, because at least fourteen Orcadians died as a result of 7th Seaforths’ failed attempt that day to capture the Butte, while two more died, in a South African and another Scottish battalion. That Orcadian death toll was equalled on a couple of other days, but then casualties were spread across many units. The failed attack on the Butte de Warlencourt on 12th October 1916 was, in Orcadian fatal casualties, the most costly battalion action of the Great War.

The Butte de Warlencourt, a fifty feet (15 metres) high old burial mound not unlike Maeshowe in Orkney, was swept bare to a white dome of chalk by artillery fire that removed all the earth and vegetation. British troops several times gained a foothold on the Butte, but the Germans always drove them off and still held it until after the Battle of the Somme ended. 47th (London) Division was relieved on 9th October in front of the Butte by 9th (Scottish) Division, which attacked towards it at 2.5 p.m. on the 12th.

From May 1916, 9th Division included a South African Infantry Brigade, which attacked on its left on 12th October, while 7th Seaforths lead the attack on its right. 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, but others were killed and wounded by “friendly fire”, because the British heavy artillery 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 would have avoided some of the heavy shells landing on the advancing Scots.

The Germans had the advantage of good observation from the Butte, the highest point of ground for miles around. German artillery observation officers on it had a clear view of the British trenches (and into some) outside the nearby ruined village of Le Sars, so could anticipate attacks and bring down accurate defensive artillery and machine gun fire. Whenever British troops reached the Butte and threatened to take over the advantage of observation from there, the Germans launched immediate counter-attacks.

The Butte de Warlencourt was purchased in 1990 by the Western Front Association. The vegetation that was swept off during the Battle of the Somme has returned and access to the top of the Butte is difficult, as only a narrow path is normally cleared. Among the soldiers to whom the memorial erected on top by the Western Front Association is dedicated are at least thirteen Orcadians, who died as a result of the failed attempt by 9th Division to capture the Butte de Warlencourt on 12th October 1916.
The bodies of four Orcadians were identified when recovered from the battlefield and buried in Warlencourt Cemetery, close to the Butte. Two of the four men had worked in the drapery business. Alfred Gibson of Rousay, who died age 40, worked as a commercial traveller for drapery in Manchester. Samuel Wylie of Sandwick, who attended school in Stromness before training and working as a tailor in the town, was aged 25. George Harvey of Birsay had worked as a joiner and survived heavy July fighting at Longueval. William Miller of Eday had worked on the family farm until he was called up. Youngest of the four Orcadians, William was 22.

The names of six Orcadian Seaforth Highlanders killed on 12th October are inscribed on Panel 15C of the Thiepval Memorial, while on Panel 4C is inscribed the name of Private William Porteous of 4th South African Regiment, born in Stromness in 1872. Two of the seven soldiers were only 19 years old. William Sutherland of Flotta was the youngest of three brothers serving in France. Thomas Twatt was born in Leith, but was working as a tailor with his father in Whitehall, Stronsay when he was called up.

The other four Seaforths killed were all in their 20s. The eldest, William Sinclair, was a Sanday farmer’s son who helped on the family farm. George Gray, a Westray crofter’s son, worked with his elder brother Thomas as stone masons. Victor Sclater worked as a horseman on his family’s Orphir horse farm. James Simison, a merchant seaman’s son, worked as a house painter.

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 (the 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 stories of William Sinclair of Sanday and the Sutherland Brothers of Flotta are among those recorded on the computers there.

On either side of 7th Seaforths on 12th October two more Orcadians died, both born in Stromness. William Porteous, the son of a Stromness baker, had emigrated to South Africa and fought in the Boer War. William died advancing with the South African Scottish on the Seaforths’ left. On 12th October 30th Division attacked Bayonet Trench a mile on 9th Division’s right, but it also met heavy machine gun fire and made only minor gains. James Harvey, who had joined the Royal Scots Fusiliers in 1909, had already been wounded in 1914 and 1915. James was wounded again in the attack on Bayonet Trench on the 12th, when his wounds proved fatal and he died later that day. James is buried in Caterpillar Valley Cemetery.

The death toll of Orcadians on 12th October thus reached a total of twelve, which was the highest number on any day of the two World Wars. It was repeated, but never exceeded, twice later in the Great War: on 9th April 1917, which was the first day of the Battle of Arras, and on 21st March 1918, the first day of the German Spring Offensive to try and win the war.
Many more Orcadians were wounded at the Butte on 12th October and of those two died later from their wounds. John Harcus of Westray, who had worked as a seaman and farm labourer, died next day, aged 41. James Tait of Stenness had worked in his uncle’s cycle repair business in Kirkwall before he was called up. James died in 56th Casualty Clearing Station at Dernancourt, near Albert on the 15th. The two deaths from wounds took the Orcadian death toll for the attack on the Butte by 7th Seaforths to a total of twelve – the highest in any battalion action during either of the world wars.

William Cursiter of Papa Westray lay wounded near the Butte until at least the next day. His right leg became infected and he endured three amputations at Erskine Hospital, which eventually left a stump a few inches below his thigh. William was invalided out of the Army on 28th May 1917. Many Orcadians recovered from wounds they received at the Butte, only to return to France or other theatres (where several died when wounded again).

There is evidence that Orkney’s heavy casualty toll in 7th Seaforths’ attack on 12th October 1916 was increased by the British Army’s policy of grouping together friends from the same district to raise morale. Only one of the dozen Orcadian Seaforths who died as a result of the attack has his company shown on his internet Commonwealth War Graves Commission record: Private John Drever Harcus, of Westray, served in “D” Company.

The local newspaper, The Orkney Herald, gave the following information on the death of Private John D. Harcus, under the heading “Died of Wounds”:

“It is with deep regret that we announce the death in France of Pte. John D. Harcus, Seaforth Highlanders. He was wounded on 12th October, in action, and died on 14th October. Pte. Harcus was 40 years of age, and was the third son of Mrs John Harcus, Old Glen, Westray. John had spent most of his youthful days at sea, but before enlisting he had been engaged at the mill at Pierowall and on the farms of Brough and Noup. He was a strong robust-looking man, and quite a favourite with everybody. The heartfelt sympathy of the community is extended to Mrs Harcus in her bereavement. Mrs Harcus has, among other letters of condolence, received the following from one of her son’s officers:

DEAR MRS HARCUS, – I take this opportunity of conveying to you my sincerest sympathy in your sad loss. Your son fell with many of his comrades on the 12th of last month during an attack on the enemy’s lines. He was one of the finest of our men, and like all the Orkney boys, was very well liked. They were all here together in this company, and finer soldiers and better men could not have been desired. Your son was a promising soldier, and we found him to be always ready and willing, which to us means everything. I shall be pleased to give you what particulars I can if you write and ask. The other officers desire me to express their deepest sympathy. – Believe me to be, yours truly, J. KETCHIE, 2nd Lieut., Seaforth Highlanders.

Many of the Orcadian soldiers who served together in “D” Company of 7th Seaforths died together. They were probably most shot down by heavy German machine gun and rifle fire, but possibly some died from the “friendly fire” of heavy artillery shells firing “short”.

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