

Andrew and Thomas Harcus



Andrew Harcus

When the Great War started, distant cousins Andrew and Thomas Harcus of Westray were both working as ploughmen, although Thomas also worked a small croft at Pow. Thomas was aged 28, had married Ellenor Rendall in September 1904 and they had two children, a son Thomas and daughter Georgina. Andrew, who was aged 24 and lived at Tirlot, had just married in July, to Francis Burgher of Rapness. It is likely that neither of the families expected to see the father head off to the war, which probably seemed a long way off and an adventure for younger, mostly unmarried, men to take on.

The early rush of recruits had fallen away as the war entered its second winter and word had come home of a dozen Orcadians killed in the Battle of Loos and a similar number in far off Gallipoli, when it became clear in late 1915 that compulsory military service would be introduced early in 1916. Andrew had become father to a daughter Tomina and Francis was expecting another child (born a son, Andrew in early 1916).

Andrew and Thomas had probably discussed enlisting and decided to follow the same plan. They crossed to Papa Westray on 17th December and enlisted at Holland House under the Derby Scheme. They chose to enlist in the Royal Garrison Artillery, as had been given a recruitment notice by Thomas Bond, the RSM of the Orkney RGA. They opted out of immediate service, so received a day's army pay and a grey armband with a crown (to show they had volunteered), before they were posted into Section B Army Reserve to await later call up. As married men, they would not be mobilized until after single men had been conscripted.

Andrew was mobilized on 29th May 1916 and Thomas on 15th June. They met up again at No. 3 RGA Depot in Plymouth and after recruitment formalities left on 24th June with a large draft of gunners which included seven Orcadians. They crossed to Ireland and joined 10th Company RGA at the port of Queenstown (now called Cobh). Andrew and Thomas trained on the coastal defence guns of the busy port for five months, before they were posted to France together on 16th November.

Andrew, Thomas and another Harcus cousin from Westray, John who lived at Rackwick and had been a farmer and postman, left the RGA Base Depot at Le Havre together a week later and joined 95 Siege Battery, RGA. It had arrived on the Western Front in May 1916, to take part in the Battle of the Somme, and was equipped with four 9.2-inch howitzers. These formidable artillery weapons were manufactured in the UK by Vickers and in the USA by Bethlehem Steel and were the principal BEF counter-battery weapon: weighed 5 tons and fired a 290 lb (130 kg) shell nearly 6 miles. A 9-ton earth box was attached to prevent "bucking" when fired.



Thomas Harcus

95 Siege Battery fired in April 1917 in support of the Canadian capture of Vimy Ridge, during the Battle of Arras. John Harcus was wounded on 7th May and spent two months in Cambridge Hospital, before he returned to France and joined 39 Siege Battery to serve in it for the remainder of the war.

Andrew and Thomas Harcus stayed in 95 Siege Battery, which after the Battle of Arras travelled north to the Ypres Salient. The battery spent a short time at Goldfish Chateau, a few hundred yards from Ypres, but then moved to the village of St Jean, just over a mile to the north-east of the town. From there it fired in support of the offensive that became known as Passchendaele.



The preliminary artillery barrage at Passchendaele started on 16th July and firing continued to and beyond the opening infantry attack on the 31st. 95 Siege Battery had probably fired hundreds of shells at St Jean, when on 3rd August a shell exploded prematurely in the breach of one of the howitzers, killing eleven gunners. Andrew and Thomas Harcus were both among those killed. The two Westray gunners now lie in a line of graves with five of their comrades in Vlamertinghe New Military Cemetery, three miles west of Ieper (as Ypres is now spelt).