

DOUGLAS RENNIE



18th October 1916

1888-1916 Age 28

Private S/40470 5th (Service) Battalion Cameron Highlanders.

Douglas Rennie, who was known as Jack, was born late in 1888 in Morley, West Yorkshire. He was the youngest of the eight surviving children of William Milne Rennie and Rachel Cumming, originally from Aberdeenshire in Scotland. He had five brothers and two sisters. His parents moved to the Bradford area around 1880 when William purchased a worsted spinning mill. When he died in 1900 at the early age of 44, William was a wealthy man whose effects were worth in excess of £40,000 (more than £2 million today). William's two elder sons, William Edward and James Alexander Rennie continued the business, and employed their next three younger brothers, Herbert, Hamilton and Cecil (1901 Census).

Jack was still a schoolboy at this time, and he attended Bradford Grammar School for three years on the Modern side of the school, starting in 1901. His French and German were weak in his final year; his most successful subjects were Physics, Art, History, Chemistry and Maths. It has not been possible to trace what Jack did after he left school at fifteen. It would have been natural to follow his brothers into the family firm. However, at the time of the 1911 Census his mother lived alone in a substantial house in Undercliffe, and his brothers and sisters had married and left home. There is no record of where Jack was living or what his occupation was.

Jack enlisted in the Army in Bradford, giving his place of birth as Aberdeen, so he was perhaps keen to serve in a Scottish regiment. This is unlikely to have been before 1915. He was initially posted to the Territorial 4th Battalion Cameron Highlanders, which had gone to the Western Front in February 1915. Jack joined them after the start of 1916, and they were disbanded in March of that year. At some point he was transferred to the 5th battalion of the same regiment. During the Somme fighting they were heavily engaged as part of 9th Scottish Division in the struggle for Delville Wood in July and



August. After a period of recuperation and rebuilding, in October the 9th Division was given the task of taking the Butte de Warlencourt, a fifty-foot high mound of chalk which dominated the slopes around it. At 3.40am on 18th October the 5th Camerons advanced on Snag Trench in a heavy deluge which turned the ground into a soft ooze. Despite a feeble smoke screen and the weakness of the barrage, they succeeded in taking and holding their objective, losing 67 dead. Rennie was one of them, although at first he was reported as missing. An officer who was in the trench a few days later described it as full of mud and water with bodies sticking out all along where they had been hastily buried. Proper burial was only possible months later following the German retreat from the Somme area in 1917. By then it was impossible to identify his body, if it was even found, and his name is listed among the missing on the Thiepval Memorial. In April it was officially pronounced that his death was accepted on or since 18th October.



Acknowledgements:

Rennie's photo is from the O.B.A. Roll of Honour with thanks. Ancestry.com was used for the family history, however there are many holes in what I have been able to establish. <<http://boards.ancestry.co.uk/thread.aspx?mv=flat&m=367&p=surnames.rennie>> accessed 16-10-2016 is concerned with a cousin. The Douglas Rennie who sailed from Glasgow to Quebec in 1912 does not seem to be our man. The B.G.S. Annual Reports for 1902, 1903 and 1904 were used for his school years in First, Second and Third Modern. The absence of a date from the Medal Index Card indicates that Douglas did not go overseas until 1916. There is no next-of-kin in the Register of Soldiers Effects—had he fallen out with his family? For the Cameron Highlanders, I used <<http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/army/regiments-and-corps/the-british-infantry-regiments-of-1914-1918/queens-own-cameron-highlanders/>>, <<https://www.forces-war-records.co.uk/units/291/cameron-highlanders/>>, <<http://www.rootschat.com/forum/index.php?topic=623965.0>>, and <<http://lib.militaryarchive.co.uk/library/divisional-histories/library/The-History-of-the-9th-Scottish-Division/HTML/index.asp#/186/>> (all accessed accessed 17-10-2016). The latter is John Ewing, The History of the 9th (Scottish) Division 1914-1919 (London, 1921), chapter 7 for the Butte de Warlencourt, in the absence of the 5th Battalion's War Diary which is not available on Ancestry. The description of Snag Trench is from Peter Hart, The Somme (London, paperback ed. 2006), 496.

The Bradfordian, July 1917, reported Rennie was killed in April, a confusion; the Bradford Daily Telegraph reported on 11th May that he was now believed killed in action I am grateful to West Yorkshire Local Studies Library for checking this for me.

This biography was researched and composed by Nick Hooper, October 2016 (Nhooper1956@googlemail.com).