

FORGET ME NOT

HUGH & DONALD MCPHERSON FRASER JOHN COLEMAN'S GREAT UNCLES

Brothers Hugh and Donald were born in India, of British parents, in 1878 and 1892 respectively. They grew up and went to school in Naini Tal, one of the British hill stations in north western India.

Hugh enlisted in the British army in India in June 1897, joining the Yorkshire Regiment (Green Howards), 2nd Battalion. He was soon in action, serving in the Tirah campaign on the North West Frontier (1897/98). This was a prolonged and difficult operation to put down a major uprising by the Pathan tribesmen – fore-runners of today's Taliban in the same area, now the borders of Pakistan/Afghanistan. He reached the rank of corporal by 1904. The battalion was stationed at various locations around India, moving to South Africa in 1906, then to England in 1909 and to garrison duty in the Channel Islands in 1913. Hugh was in a barracks at York for the 1911 census, with the rank of sergeant.

Donald travelled to England about 1909/10 and enlisted in the British army, joining the Bedfordshire Regiment, 2nd Battalion around March/May 1910 – so he was barely 18 at the time. His battalion was on garrison duty in Bermuda in 1910, moving to South Africa in 1912. He was a lance corporal by 1914.

Soon after the outbreak of war Hugh's and Donald's battalions were recalled to England to form part of the 21st Infantry Brigade of the 7th Division. They encamped at Lyndhurst in the New Forest during September for equipping and intensive training, and shipped to Zeebrugge in early October. It seems likely that the brothers would have had some opportunity to meet up during this period, despite the intensity and urgency of the preparations for war. The two battalions were also marching together during some of the early movements through Belgium.

The 7th Division eventually formed a major part of the defensive force for Ypres, a key junction in the path of the advancing German army. Hugh's battalion (2nd Yorkshires) held about a mile of the defensive line, including a cross-roads on the Menin road, about 5 miles east of Ypres. To their immediate left was Donald's battalion (2nd Bedfordshires) so the two brothers could have been less than a mile apart, but probably never in contact on the battlefield.

Some early skirmishes on 19th October marked the start of the First Battle of Ypres. The full onslaught began on the 20th with very heavy shell fire – the first that many soldiers had experienced – followed by strong infantry attacks, driven back by machine gun and rifle fire. From then on the British line was under continued attack by artillery and sniper fire, with intermittent infantry attacks, for a month. The survivors of the two battalions were finally withdrawn from the line on 6th November, exhausted, ragged and plastered with mud after three weeks of almost continuous action. They received strong commendations for their actions from the Divisional and Brigade commanders, but by then Hugh had been killed.

The exact date of Hugh's death is uncertain. Originally listed in the battalion Gazette as 'Missing', he was later listed (with 8 others) as 'Now presumed dead, reported Wounded and Missing between 22 October and 6 November 1914'. He is buried in Harlebeke Cemetery, about 20 miles east of Ypres, where his grave gives his death as 6 November 1914. A memorial erected by his family, gives his date of death as 29th October 1914 which seems the



Donald



Hugh

most likely, as it was probably based on information they received soon afterwards. The battalion Gazette records a particularly intensive and costly action on this date, involving 'C' Company, of which Hugh was a member, so this could be when he was killed.

Donald survived the first battle of Ypres although it is not known if he was injured. For the rest of the year, while the battered battalion was being reinforced and re-equipped, the 2nd Beds war diary records several periods in reserve trenches, but little major action. The events of the "Christmas Truce" were recorded on December 25th.

During 1915 the war diary records several major actions in France, including Neuve Chapelle (10-14 March), Festubert (16-20 May), Givenchy (15-19 June), Loos (25 September - 1 October). Donald may have been involved in some or all of these, depending on any injuries. In December the 2nd Beds were transferred to the 30th Division and in June 1916 occupied trenches at Maricourt – the southernmost position in the British sector on the Somme, bordering the French sector.

On 1st July 1916 – the infamous first day of the Somme – the 18th and 30th Divisions in the south, including Donald's battalion, were the only ones to take and hold their objectives, unlike any other part of the British sector. The battalion was then involved in numerous other actions in the continuing battle of the Somme, including the notorious Trones Wood. Donald was eventually killed on 30th July in an attack on Maltz Horn Farm, which was ultimately successful. On 31st July the Battalion was strongly commended by the Divisional Commander for their valiant and successful actions. Donald's grave is in Flatiron Copse Cemetery, Mametz – a very quiet and beautiful place.

A memorial to the two brothers was erected by the family in the church of St John in the Wilderness, Naini Tal – a classic home-counties church, built in the foothills of the Himalayas.



Hugh and Donald's Death Pennies

