Arras, 23 April 1917 – the Battle’s Later Phases

(This is part of the epic history written by Jon Sandison about the part Shetlanders played on the Western Front during World War One)

*Either man will abolish war, or war will abolish man.* Bertrand Russell

Glancing at the graveyards, and memorials in France, our thoughts rushed back to home and communities such as Burra Isle. Names of men etched on stone in France, yet whose loss impacted on our native voes and inlets.

Going into Burra and pausing at Bridge End, the panoramic view of West and East Burra lies open before us, with Fitful away in the distance. A familiar sight to many.

The old school house at the bridge, and the Baptist Church above the steep hill are both poignant buildings in the community, as they were almost one hundred years ago.

The third structure, standing there, with the many houses that have sprung up during that time, is the war memorial.

A stop here is filled the peace and quietness; a stillness that any typical Shetland rural place can always offer, with only the sea breeze sometimes disturbing the tranquillity. Although a scene unique to Burra and its community, it is wholly common to communities throughout Britain. Each has its own local memorial in its own place; with its own identity and stillness. All are important to the area it represents, and have been stricken by the horrible impact of war. Like many areas of Shetland, Burra had already suffered loss at the Ancre with the name of John William Jamieson on the memorial. He is buried at the Y-Ravine Cemetery near Beaumont Hamel. Some in the community would have walked up the hill to the Baptist Kirk, on Sunday 22 April 1917, with little awareness of what would be going through two local lads' minds at that time, hundreds of miles away in Arras.

The story of Arras, which had begun with such noise and ferocity earlier in the month, continued on 23 April, and the local stories began to emerge. In it were two Burra Isles' men, both in different Scottish Battalions. James Pottinger made it home.
Another, Thomas Aitken, did not. The former, in later life, was to contribute so much to our community. The latter, and many others, made the ultimate sacrifice.

After the initial offensive on 9 April had come to a standstill, General Allenby planned for a new offensive. By 23 April, the 51st Highland Division, and Shetlanders within it, was to launch a fresh assault south east towards the village of Roeux and its chemical works. This was a large factory surrounded by buildings that had been used as dwellings. The attack involved a tough role for the division. From around 15 April, and to its displeasure, the division was holding the trenches at Fampoux nearby. It had been out of the line on rest since the start of the battle and was to relieve the 9th Division at Roeux. The division leader, Major Harper, was given orders that his men would attack from their positions, which were not the best, and advance on Roeux capturing the chemical works. This was as far as the battle had reached when it was over by the end of May. The morning of 23 April began with mist. The visibility was worsened by the British barrage and bombardment. But this was cleared by the wind and sun. The rest of the day was clear and warm.

The chemical works had been renamed Comical Works by the Scottish soldiers. The ironic humour rings clear even today. The attack was to be largely carried out by weary troops, and without the help of reconnaissance and preparation that had existed in the opening days earlier in the month. The attack began at 4:45 am. The village of Roeux is almost due East of Arras and the advance had only moved partway to Roeux since the disastrous attack from Fampoux on 11 April. The 7th Gordons were to attack with the 4th Gordons, one battalion attacking the Chemical Works, and two attacking south slightly to the south at the village.

![Gordons attack on the Chemical Works. Fred A Farrel.](image1)

![Chemical Works Roeux before and after the offensive.](image2)
The 7th Gordon Highlanders attacked on the left in the first line, the 7th Black Watch on its right. The 7th Gordons had two companies in line which were to take the first and second objectives, one for the third and one in reserve.

The left company reached the first objective and inflicted large losses on the Germans who continued to resist valiantly. The right faced heavy machine gun fire and was held firmly to ground. However, with the assistance of the left company, which attacked with bombs to its right, the German defenders were shifted. One group, containing mainly a single platoon, reached the second objective. The rest of the battalion was brought to a standstill between the two objectives, capturing 76 prisoners in the open or in communication trenches.

To the Gordons’ right, the 7th Black Watch had failed to take the first objective. The 6th Gordon Highlanders to their rear began an advance in artillery formation, and had to deploy before it was intended. Carrying other troops with it and inclining slightly to its right, it passed through the Chemical Works and to a position beyond. Then it was the turn of the 7th Gordons on the left to strike another blow. Taking advantage of the confusion into which the enemy had been thrown, two companies went forward. It was noted that it had developed into perhaps ‘the most savage infantry battle that the 51st Highland Division took part in’.

Within this mire was James Pottinger, from Burra Isle. Born in 1897, James was from Setter, Hamnavoe, and from a family of nine. He had worked as a delivery boy in Lerwick taking supplies to fishing boats berthed in the harbour. When War broke out in 1914 he served as a Private in the 2nd Battalion of the Gordon Highlanders. Like many others during the War, he switched between battalions and was part of the 7th and 2nd Gordons.

He had spent time as part of the Sandwick Cable Guard on the outbreak of war, and had sailed from Lerwick on the Cambria in June 1915.

He was not enlisted for Imperial Service, and spent time at Fort Matilda, Greenock, and employed on guard duties at shipyards and munitions factories. By May 1916, James, like many others, went for further training in Ripon, then arrived in France in July. He took part in the Ancre advance later in the year.

In his diary, as part of the 7th Gordons, he mentions that they ‘went over the top at 5.50am to heavy shelling, machine gun and rifle fire’.
He then says how ‘our men were mowed down by the score’. In this attack James states that a Captain and many of those of senior rank were also killed.

The leading companies were held up by flanking fire from the south of River Scarpe and frontal fire from Roeux. James diary explains how they reached their objective after being held up for three hours in shell holes by very heavy machine gun fire. There were so few men left at this stage that they had to withdraw with the Germans attacking. James Pottinger then makes clear how the many dead Germans with the subsequent stench had a major impact on him. The men would not give up, but continued to work their way forward in small parties. They got into the first objective short of the Chemical Works, but not on the whole front. The other two companies, which advanced ten minutes later, passed through on the right, but were stopped on the left where their predecessors had failed. One platoon lost direction, veered right, and passed through Roeux, the objective of the 7th Argylls. Another party aided by a tank, entered the Chemical Works. Two platoons of the right company were lost entirely, with no one returning.

For James to have survived was miraculous. During World War Two he was a special constable in Burra. He became a County Councillor, first for Burra between 1938 and 1955, and then for Sandwick between 1955 and 1958, and Whalsay and Skerries between 1964 and 1973. He died on 27 February 1980 and is buried in Burra.

The 4th Gordon Highlanders were involved again, being on the left front battalion of the 154th Brigade, with the 7th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders to its right, towards Roeux. Somewhere along this line, Private James Inkster of the 4th Gordons, King Harold Street, Lerwick, and a cousin of Karl Manson was killed. Also Private John Scollay, 4th Gordons, formerly of Scalloway, died of wounds on 21 May. It is highly likely that John would have been wounded around this time. The 4th Gordons were deployed in and around Arras from late April to 1 June 1917.

A counter attack succeeded in recapturing the Chemical Works just after sunset. On 24 April there was a lull in the fighting, apart from some artillery fire. The infantry on both sides being greatly depleted and worn out. Accounts about what happened in the fighting for Roeux and the Chemical Works are vague. The Official History seems to indicate confusion throughout the day and a failure of communication on the battlefield. By 10.00pm, the division had spent all of its energy. Around 2,000 lay dead, wounded or missing in and around the village of Roeux and the Chemical Works.

On 23 April, the 15th Division also fought a tooth and nail battle for Guemappe, which is south east of Arras. A two hour fire fight developed, with the men of the 8th Seaforths creeping from trench to trench and shell-hole to shell-hole. From there, they managed to push the Germans out, and endured several heavy counter-attacks, but maintained a delicate grip on a line of shell holes east of the village. The Germans eventually succumbed and the place was captured. But, as was so often the case, it was not held. The Seaforths were exposed to continuous and devastating machine gun fire. This eventually forced the battalion to pull out of the village. Three officers and 95 men were killed that day. Among them was Private Thomas Aitken, who we have previously mentioned.
Son of William and Catherine Aitken, Houlls, Burra Isle, aged 40, Thomas is buried at Guémappe British Cemetery, Wancourt, France. His name is scribed in black on the Burra War Memorial.

Another Seaforth who died later of wounds in hospital was Lance Corporal Robert Sinclair, 2nd Seaforth Highlanders. As Robert died in Britain on the 24 May, it is highly likely that he was wounded as far back as the tail end of the Battle of Arras. Son of John Strong and Martha Sinclair, Hoswick, he died of wounds in the Military Hospital, Woking, on Thursday 24 May 1917, aged 24 years. He was buried at Sandwick Parish Churchyard.

The war of attrition continued along the Arras front, up until June. The time for the 2nd Gordon Highlanders had come by early May. They attacked further south with the objective of securing a triangular area south east of Bullecourt, and further east to take a thousand yards of the front trench of the Hindenburg Line. The first objective was secured smoothly, with the second falling to Gordon companies that passed through. However, German fire forced the abandonment of the left flank. It was noted that they went forward with the ‘utmost dash and determination’. Another man with Shetland connections was Private William Allan, 2nd Battalion Gordon Highlanders, killed in action on 6 May according to the Roll of Honour, though he is listed as dying on 17 May by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Although from Aberdeen, he was married to Mary Allan, West Setter, Weisdale.

The overall losses were severe. General Haig had kept the attack going as Nivelle’s offensive was faltering, to the degree that mutiny was beginning to spread amongst the French. In the fighting around Arras, Britain suffered 158,000 casualties, whilst the Germans had between 130,000 and 160,000. Overall, the Battle of Arras is viewed today to be a British victory as a result of the gain of Vimy Ridge. But, predictably, all the loss and suffering did little to change the overall stalemate of the Western Front. One positive lesson was learned from Arras. This was with regard to the combined use of infantry, artillery and tanks; a tactic that would be used more wisely later. Little comfort of course to those lost at Arras. By 10 May, news and details of the men lost would be coming back home and shared with our folk on the black ink of the Shetland News and Times.

With our own legs stretched, a drink of water on board, we squeezed back into the car, continuing our journey towards Cambrai and the Somme. There was much to think about once again. Arras was not forgotten.

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