Norman Porteous and the Great War

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Norman Porteous was born on 9 September 1898, and educated at the Knox Institute, Haddington. On the outbreak of war he resided with his parents at Simla Lodge, Haddington. His elder brother, Alexander James Dow Porteous ('Alick'), was conscripted into 2/8th Royal Scots in September 1916. He himself was ultimately commissioned into Royal Scots Fusiliers, serving with the 11th Battalion in France during the latter part of 1918.

On 6 July 1916, he gained first place in the Jardine Bursary Competition, at the University of Edinburgh. On 18 July, he travelled to the Royal Scots depot at Glencorse with his father to attest. This was a bureaucratic preparation for the coming of his eighteenth birthday in September – at which point he could be notified to report to military camp on (for example) a week or a fortnight's notice. He was not medically examined, and was sent home. On 19 July, he received his military armlet from Glencorse by post. On 9 October 1916, he matriculated at the University of Edinburgh in the Arts Faculty. He finished the academic year first in all class work: Latin composition, literature and history; ancient Roman history, ancient Greek history and ancient Greek philosophy, with the appropriate medals and first class certificates. Towards the end of March he was notified to report on 16 April to the military authorities at Kinross to begin his military training. That day, he left home at 8.15 a.m., arriving at camp late that afternoon. He had spent the last few days writing to pals and saying goodbye.

In 1914, Great Britain's 'Regular' Army was composed of fewer than 250,000 officers and men – spread across the globe as an Imperial garrison. The creation of Lord Kitchener's 'New' Army in 1914 and 1915 was a journey into the unknown – a monstrous logistic effort that required policy to be 'made up' on an almost daily basis. The battalions of the New Army were raised independently (and often idiosyncratically) by a multitude of local committees. Each had a

nominal limit of around 1,000 (later 1,400) officers and men. Usually there was a surplus of volunteers; the War Office therefore began to encourage the formation of 'Local Reserve Battalions' under the pre-existing local regimental structure – a pool of additional recruits who would train alongside the principal battalion and from which replacements might be drawn once the principal battalion began to suffer casualties on active service. These reserve battalions, therefore, were not intended to serve overseas.

In January 1916 the Military Service Act introduced conscription. It quickly became apparent to the War Office that these regimental reserve units were unable to cope with the vast additional number of recruits. The system (such as it was) required drastic and urgent reform. On 1 September, therefore, a new organisation, the 'Training Reserve' was hurriedly created to receive and train recruits and dispatch drafts abroad. This again was a journey into the unknown, a steep learning curve. It was not surprising, therefore, that in May 1917 the Training Reserve itself was reorganised – divided into 'Young Soldier Battalions' (which took 18-year-olds through basic training) and 'Graduated Battalions' (which took entire companies of the 'basically trained' and – in the words of an old friend of mine – 'finished them off'). On 27 October 1917 the Graduated Battalions were returned to the umbrella of the old regimental system, numbered 51st and 52nd across the board. This, then, was the new and changing world that Norman Porteous entered in April 1917.

On arrival at Kinross Norman became Private TR^2/18071 Highland Light Infantry. Almost immediately he was identified as potential NCO material, and within a week was appointed acting lance corporal. The novelty of camp life soon wore off. It was a daily grind of squad drill, musketry, bayonet work and what the War Office manual liked to call the 'development of soldierly spirit'. The principal object of training was to make each soldier 'mentally and physically a better man than his adversary on the field of battle'. In practice, this involved a great deal of route marching. The British Army had the fittest feet in Europe. Norman soon emerged as the best shot in his company. By the end of May his stripe was permanent and his CO advised him to apply to

become an officer. Around this time he wrote his father that he had been 'annoyed by some rude fellows'. Perhaps (given his background) he was finding barrack life a little on the *coorse* side.

The 56th Training Reserve Battalion (12th Reserve Infantry Brigade) was formed in September 1916. Brigade Headquarters were at Kinghorn; individual units were apparently scattered all over Fife. In May 1917 this formation became the 205th Graduated Battalion and moved thereafter to Witton Hall, near Norwich. On 27 October 1917 it underwent a further change, becoming the 52nd (Graduated) Battalion of the Highland Light Infantry [part of 192nd Brigade, 64th (2nd Highland) Division – a 'second line' Territorial division that never left the UK].

Norman sent in his commission application on 12 June 1917. He was medically examined three days later and passed fit – although his weight and chest measurement were observed to be 'below standard'. In the middle of July his battalion moved to Witton Camp in Norfolk. Witton was about three miles from the market town of North Walsham, which (in turn) was about 16 miles north of Norwich. Meanwhile the commission application continued to be processed; there were forms to be completed and character references to be sought. On 7 November 1917, he was finally ordered to report to No. 6 Officer Cadet Battalion ('OCB'), which was based at Balliol in Oxford. By now there were 23 OCBs in the UK. They were inaugurated in February 1917 as a response to the need to introduce a more formal and consistent system of training for the subalterns of the New Armies. In 1914 and 1915 commissions in the new battalions had been granted on the basis of education and civil status. These (mainly young) men learned the military ropes alongside the 'other ranks' in a fairly haphazard manner. Occasionally they might be required to attend outside courses organised by the War Office; for the most part, however, the training of commissioned ranks left much to be desired. Heavy casualties among junior officers during the Somme battles of 1916 created an immediate crisis of replacement. The OCBs were intended to address that crisis and to address it quickly. There is no evidence, however, to suggest that they imparted any great knowledge of conditions at the front; rather they simply offered the potential officer a congenial environment in which to acquire a very

limited set of military skills – not the least of which was (inevitably) Army etiquette. Tactical training and the use of weapons received no particular emphasis: they would learn these things when they arrived in France, and not before then. Among experienced 'line' officers, contempt for Army training and specialist courses was almost universal. The real knowledge was like a secret masonry, passed among initiates in the trenches. You learned from your own mistakes, and (if you were lucky) you learned from the mistakes of others. Frequently, these 'others' were no longer alive.

On 28 March 1918, Norman was discharged to a commission as a second lieutenant in the Royal Scots. A week earlier Germany had launched Operation Michael, a massive offensive aimed at breaking the British line on the old Somme battlefield in Picardy. Casualties on the first day alone amounted to 39,000 officers and men. As Norman awaited receipt of his commission scroll, the British Army was in headlong retreat. With the position in France growing more desperate by the hour, he must have expected to be sent across the Channel at any moment. On 29 March, however, the War Office posted him to Ireland. In December 1917 the 3rd (Reserve) Battalion of the Royal Scots – the so-called 'Depot' Battalion – had moved to Richmond Barracks at Mullingar in County Westmeath. This, in part, was a response to the Army's worsening manpower shortage. The War Office was killing two birds with one stone: not only would the battalion maintain an active training role, but it would also function as a 'garrison' unit to police the local population. Mullingar was a deeply unpopular posting, particularly for 1914 and 1915 soldiers who arrived at the battalion as part of their recovery from wounds sustained on service at the front. These men had volunteered to fight Kaiserism and had no interest in Irish political affairs. The natives would spit on them in the street; their lives were at risk for no easily discernible reason. For some, the trenches were preferable and there are recorded instances of men specifically requesting a posting to France rather than be forced to serve in Ireland.

Norman's stay on the Emerald Isle lasted until 29 May. That morning he was awarded four days embarkation leave. A hurried journey to Haddington gave him just two days with his family before he left for London. On 7 June he sailed from Dover to join the 13th Royal Scots, one of the battalions of the famous 15th (Scottish) Division, which is considered by historians to have been something of an elite, one of the best British divisions to have served in the war.

Norman arrived at Battalion HQ on 5 July, by which time the German offensive machine had battered itself into exhaustion. The 13th Royal Scots were in reserve, just behind the front line east of Arras. The commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel James Alexander Turner, was only 26, a thrice-wounded veteran of three years on the Western Front, much loved by his men. Norman met him for the first time on 10 July. He wrote home to his father that evening, explaining that he had been given a platoon, along with a 'nice' platoon sergeant who knew his duty. This sergeant would prove to be a more effective teacher than any Cadet Battalion instructor; he led Norman on his first night patrol of no man's land. There would be several such sorties before any green officer would be considered 'safe' to lead a patrol for himself. At the dangerous sharp end, the Army was decidedly more democratic than on Salisbury Plain.

On 16 July the division moved south to the French sector, near Soissons. They went into the line a week later and were immediately subjected to persistent heavy shellfire. On 23 July the division, with the 13th in reserve, assaulted the German position in front of Buzancy. They were repulsed with dreadful losses. On 26 July Colonel Turner was killed by a shell which burst in his HQ dugout. On 1 August, still leaderless, the battalion took part in an attack on German positions in front of the village of Villemontoire. Initially, the enemy fell back and the 13th pursued them for several miles before resistance began to stiffen. After the battle, as a tribute to the bravery of the Scottish Division, their French comrades constructed a cairn on the highest point of the Buzancy Ridge. The words, inscribed in French, are quite moving: 'Here the thistles of Scotland will bloom forever among the roses of France.'

On 5 August, after eight days of continuous heavy fighting, the 15th returned to Arras. Almost immediately it was transferred to the salient at Loos, a quiet sector, where the division had suffered heavy casualties during the British offensive of September 1915. Here, the High Command had decided, there would be no set battles; instead the enemy line would be continually tested by offensive patrols unsupported by artillery or detailed reconnaissance. It was a nightmare of uncertainty. No one knew what was waiting in the dark: a deserted trench or a hail of bullets. The regimental historian, a decorated veteran, noted that the 'nervous tension inherent in this type of war was greater than that arising from the usual organised battle'. Norman later told his family that he had taken part in several such adventures; in common with many survivors, however, he would not be drawn on any detail.

Early in September, while his battalion was billeted near the village of Mazingarbe, Norman took ill with measles, a virulent disease which was spreading through the division. He was immediately removed to a field hospital, where the medical staff decided to transfer him to one of the main Base hospitals at Etaples, south of Boulogne. Command of his platoon was transferred to 2/Lt William Forbes Forsyth. Forsyth, at 38, was old for a subaltern. Norman wrote to his father from Etaples on 9 September, saying that he was being well looked after. While he was away the battalion moved into the line opposite a German position known as 'The Quarries', establishing a thin screen of defensive posts, which were immediately contested by the enemy. This particular tour of duty was distinguished by a grim series of bombing exchanges in which no quarter was either asked or given. On the night of 15 September Bill Forsyth took his new command into the front line with orders to drive the enemy back into their forward support trench. The Germans struck first. At 5.35 a.m. they launched a furious assault. Forsyth and most of Norman's lads were killed. After recovering in hospital, Norman was granted three weeks home leave; when he returned to his platoon on 30 October, he found few familiar faces. The 15th was in Divisional Reserve at the time: there would be no more fighting for them. When the Armistice was signed on 11 November, they were billeted in the Belgian village of Blicquy, nearly 30 miles beyond Lille and deep inside what had once been occupied territory.

2/Lt William Forbes Forsyth (13th RS) was killed in action on15 September 1918. He was a native of Falkirk; the husband of Winnie J. McCracken Forsyth, 10 Colebrooke Terrace, Glasgow; and the son of James Forsyth and Helen Gibb Forsyth. For many years he served as the organist at Paisley Abbey. He is buried at Nœux-les-Mines, Communal Cemetery Extension, France (Plot V, Row A, Grave 4).

Norman Porteous was finally discharged from the Army on 15 March 1919. He had been a soldier for almost two years, yet he served at the front for something under two months. His lifelong reluctance to speak of these times might be explained by some sort of generational modesty, or by a simple desire to forget. I suspect there was more to it. In September 1918 he was reprieved by benevolent Fate, which decreed that he must be absent from the bloody fight that claimed the lives of his replacement and many of his men. Occasionally, especially in his later years, he would mention the organist, but never by name. His family were intrigued but ultimately mystified. He carried his memories of the man to his grave; until today, no one had any idea who he was. If Norman is present, I hope he will not mind my indiscretion. I feel sure that he would want Bill mentioned on an occasion such as this.

There are, perhaps, *two* lives to commemorate today.