

Fettes College

The BATTLE of NEUVE CHAPELLE March 1915

Fettes in the First World War
by D. B. McDowell

10 March is the centenary of the Battle of Neuve Chapelle. This was the first offensive launched by the British from their own static trenchlines. It was meticulously planned, featuring aerial photography, timed lifts of barrages, and other innovations. The plan was to capture the enemy trenches around the village of Neuve Chapelle, with a long-term goal of driving through to Aubers Ridge, where from the high ground the German communication between La Bassee and Lille could also be disrupted. Although only a partial success, many lessons were learned from the battle. Public opinion was thrilled by some of the stories of heroism, most notably the VCs won by, among others, Gabar Singh Negi of the 2nd/39th Garhwal Rifles, who was commanded by Old Fettesian H.M. Mactier. OFs of several generations were at the heart of the action and several were killed, including the first of the 1914 leavers to die.

Captain **WALTER BRUCE GRAY-BUCHANAN** (C1900), died aged 29 on 10 March 1915 at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle. The son of Lt-Col Gray-Buchanan, Eastfield, Cambuslang, he played for the 1st XV and was in the army class, which prepared sixth formers for Sandhurst. During the First World War he was the Adjutant of the 2nd Battalion, Cameronians (Scottish Rifles).

Also killed on that day was Lieutenant **STEPHEN DE THIERRY WILLIAMSON** (S1909). The son of Mrs Williamson, Glasgow, he was a school prefect and played for the 1st XV, 1st XI, X, and Gymnastics VIII; he won the Challenge Clock and Anderson Swimming Prize, and had been awarded Certificate A for proficiency in the Officers' Training Corps. He was due to take up a place at Brasenose College, Oxford. Like Gray-Buchanan, he was an officer in the 2nd Battalion, Cameronians (Scottish Rifles), but had only been at the front for a matter of weeks. John Baynes' *Morale: a story of men and courage* tells what happened to them at Neuve Chapelle:

This battalion, which always referred to itself as the 2nd Scottish Rifles and did not normally use the name Cameronians, started the battle about nine hundred strong on 9 March. Six days later it came out of action. By this time the hundred and fifty men left were commanded by the sole surviving officer, a 2nd Lieutenant.

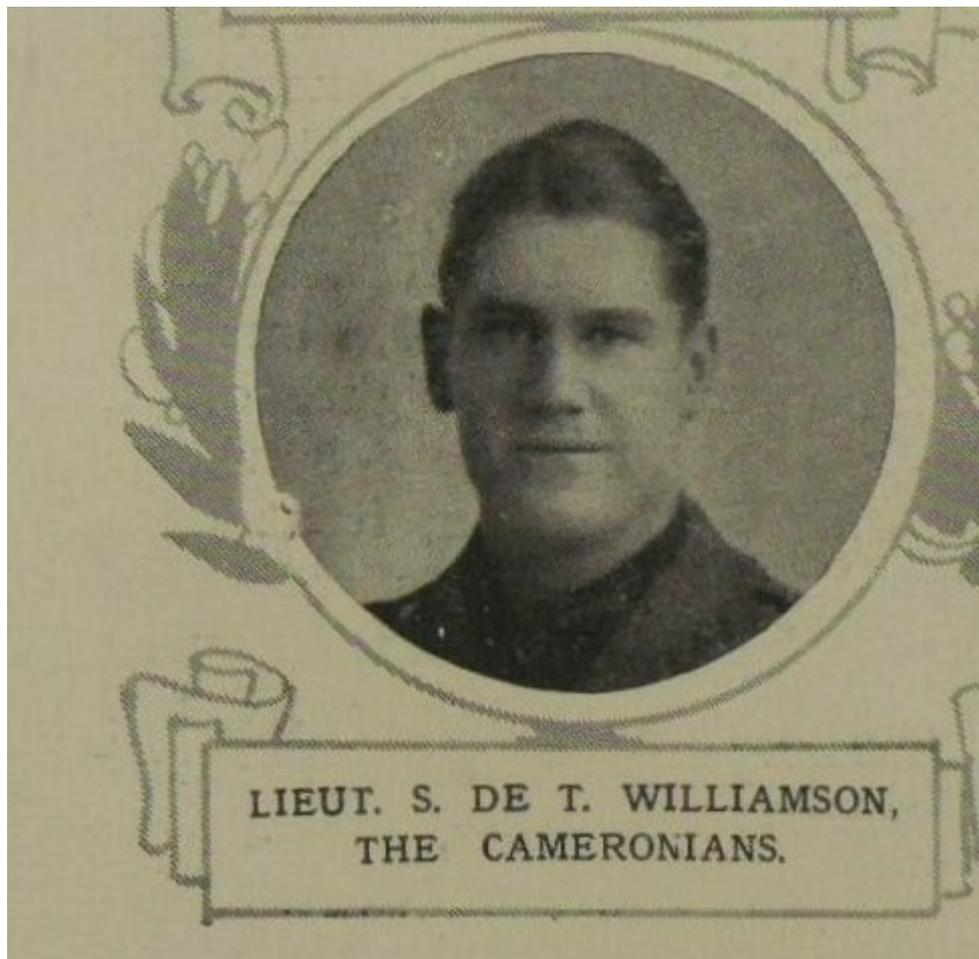
Like many First World War battles, Neuve Chapelle began with a long artillery bombardment of the German trenches. However, the shelling had not cut the barbed wire and a number of German machine-gun posts, which the aircraft had been unable to spot, had survived. A Lt. Kennedy, one of the wounded, recalled that just before the attack, Gray-Buchanan had joked about meeting again in Lille in the evening. However, when at 8.05 the 2nd Scottish Rifles went over the top, the Germans were ready:

Almost at the same moment came another noise: the whip and crack of the enemy machine-guns opening up with deadly effect. From the intensity of their fire, and its accuracy, it was clear that the shelling had not been as effective as expected. Worse than its lack of effect on the enemy was the fact that it had scarcely touched the wire. Instead of being broken up, the wire and the thick hedge looked just the same as they had before the bombardment.

'More than three years were to pass, however' wrote Kennedy, 'before Lille was to fall into British hands, and within ten minutes of our conversation Gray-Buchanan was lying dead and I myself was lying wounded and unable to move.'

Both Gray-Buchanan and Williamson are buried in Brown's Road Military Cemetery, Festubert, in adjacent rows. There is a memorial to Gray-Buchanan, and his brother Cecil who also died in 1915, in Rutherglen Old Parish Church.

Williamson's great-grandfather had, one hundred years previously, carried the despatches to Wellington at the Duchess of Richmond's Ball on the eve of the Battle of Waterloo. Steven Williamson was the first of the 1914 leavers to die in the First World War; he was 18 years old.



Second Lieutenant **ROBERT SANDERSON PATERSON** (G1909) was killed on 11th March 1915. Born at Crieff., son of the Very Rev. W. P. Paterson, D.D., Professor of Divinity at Edinburgh University, he lived at 3 Royal Terrace, Edinburgh. He attended Old Aberdeen Royal High School before coming to Fettes College (Glencorse House) in 1908. A keen

sportsman, he played for the 1st XV and XI, and won a Governors' Prize. He joined up just after war was declared, when an undergraduate at Edinburgh University, in August 1914. He was attached to the famous "Chestnut Troop" of the Royal Horse Artillery when he was killed, aged 21, at the Battle of Neuve Chapelle. He was initially reported 'missing and believed killed' on 13th March, then 'missing and believed wounded' the following day. The *Fettesian* quoted his colonel:

'Lieut. Paterson went out on duty with an infantry brigade in the recent attack on Neuve Chapelle. Instead of collecting reports, he went forward taking no one with him, saying that he thought it was too dangerous for his men.'

Paterson's body was never found; his name is on the Le Touret Memorial, Panel 1.



Lieutenant **WILLIAM ARCHIBALD MACLEAN** (K1900) was killed, aged 28, at Neuve Chapelle on 12 March 1915. A minister's son from Jordanhill, he was educated at Hillhead High School before coming to Fettes. He later attended Glasgow University, where he graduated with an MA in 1906. He qualified as an accountant, working for Nobel's Explosive Company. Although he had not been at Fettes when the OTC was set up there, he had been a member of his University OTC, and on the outbreak of war he immediately joined up. In September 1914 he was assigned to the 3rd Battalion Highland Light Infantry, later joining the 1st Battalion which had suffered heavy losses, with gaps in the ranks being filled with a mixture of reservists and new recruits. Despite the heavy losses of 10th March, Neuve Chapelle had been captured on the 11th and the British were keen to consolidate and exploit their gains. On 12th March the 1st HLI advanced to take up a forward position to the east of the town, but the reinforcements that were due to protect their flanks did not arrive on time; this left the HLI exposed and William Maclean was among those killed when they were attacked on both sides by the Germans.

The Glasgow University Website notes that: 'While at University he took an active part in its social life. He was president of the Temperance Society, and in connection with the Students Settlement he started and carried on for several winters the children's play evening. He took a very active interest in the various agencies in connection with Hillhead Baptist Church. He had a genius for friendship, and his early death is mourned by a very wide circle.'



Major **HENRY MacKINNON MACTIER** was the oldest Fettesian to be killed at Neuve Chapelle. Aged 48, he had come to Fettes (Glencorse House) in 1881, and left to become a professional soldier. Commissioned into the Royal Sussex Regiment in 1889, he transferred to the Indian Army in 1891 as a Lieutenant in the 39th Garwhal Rifles. He served in the Burma campaign of 1891-3, the Lushai Expedition of 1892, when he was awarded a medal and clasp; and in Tirah, 1897-8, when he was awarded a further medal and 2 clasps. Promoted to Captain in 1900, he served as Adjutant of the 1st Garwhal Rifles 1900-04, and rose to Major in 1907. The Indian troops arrived in France in early autumn, 1914, and were in the thick of the fighting – five of the fifteen OFs killed on the Western Front in 1914 were officers in Indian regiments. Mactier was killed on 12th March 1915; the history *With the Indians In France* records that the 39th Garwhalis, in their attack on German trenches whose barbed-wire defences had not been destroyed by artillery. Mactier, who had been sent to replace a superior officer who had been wounded, was among seven of the twelve British officers of this unit killed in the fierce fighting. He is buried along with three brother officers of the Indian Army at Laventie Military Cemetery, La Gorgue.

Although the British offensive was called off on 15th March, sporadic fighting continued in the area. The *Fettesian* recorded the school's last casualty at Neuve Chapelle as Second Lieutenant **CHARLES HODSON BARRINGTON MACDONALD** of 44th Royal Field Artillery, killed aged 26 on 25th March. Son of FCM Macdonald, Carfin Hall, Holytown, Lanarkshire, he came to Fettes (Glencorse House) in 1903 and left in 1907. He was in the Gymnastics VIII and Hockey XI, and left to study Medicine – records conflict as to where, with his *Fettesian* obituary saying Aberdeen but Glasgow University's website claiming him as an alumnus. Like many OFs, he worked in Argentina, employed at Leach's Estates. The magazine reports that 'When war broke out he threw up his post, came over and joined the R.F.A.' He is buried in Royal Irish Rifles Graveyard, Laventie, near the Stone of Remembrance.