

Private 7997 William Nicholson (1890-1977) – a survivor

The birth certificate of William Nicholson who was born on 28 February 1890 states his father to be William Nicholson, a Lance Corporal of the Cameron Highlanders then stationed at Edinburgh Castle. As William Nicholson senior was born on 4 May 1867 at Alves in Morayshire, he must have enlisted when 17 years or younger as two of his medals from Egypt exist, one dated 1884-1886. There are two enlistment records which probably relate to him. One giving him the service number 1004 states he enlisted on 13 September 1884, aged 19 years; his occupation being farm servant, his faith Presbyterian and his next of kin Mrs Nicholson of Raffand, Elgin. The other with the service number 1106 says he joined the Cameron Highlanders on 25 November 1884 aged 19 years of Presbyterian faith and with his mother Mrs Nicholson living in Forres.¹ He was discharged on 24 November 1896. The birth certificate of his daughter Elizabeth Nicholson (23 January 1892), however, lists his occupation as 'Labourer at Brewery' but he obviously re-enlisted and fought in South Africa during the second Boer War of 1899-1902; being awarded a medal with four bars – Wittebergen, Diamond Hill, Johannesburg and Cape Colony.



William and Janet Nicholson with William, Elizabeth and Thomas

William Nicholson junior is recorded as having enlisted in the Cameron Highlanders on 20 August 1907; his occupation stated as a barman from Largo, Fife

¹ Alves and Raffand or Raffart are between Elgin and Forres.

(his mother came from Largoward, a village in Kilconquhar parish) and his age as 18 years 6 months – one year older than in reality. Nicholson attended Preston Street School in Edinburgh gaining a merit certificate in 1903. The story he told in the 1960s was that in 1907 he had walked from Edinburgh to Glencorse Barracks to accompany a friend who wanted to enlist. The friend was rejected on medical grounds but Nicholson signed up. As Glencorse was the regimental depot of the Royal Scots Regiment, presumably Nicholson went from there to the 1st Battalion Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders stationed in the Cameron Barracks in Inverness.



William Nicholson's colleague on his right is unidentified. The postcard is addressed to his grandmother Mrs Keith at Largo.

At that time the 2nd Battalion served in overseas garrisons in Malta, Crete, China and India. In 1908 the Territorial and Reserve Forces Act (1907) reorganised the

reserve battalions of the regiment, transferring the Militia Battalion to the Special Reserve (3rd Battalion) while the Volunteer Battalion became the 4th Battalion in the new Territorial Force. On 8 November 1907 William Nicholson received a Third Class Certificate of Education (Army Form C. 310) signed by Lieut. F. Chandler stating his attainments to be 'Writing from Dictation – Requisite Proficiency in writing Regimental Orders and Arithmetic – Requisite Proficiency in Notation and Numeration, in Compound Rules and Reduction of Money, and in arranging and balancing Daily Messing Accounts'.

Amongst the Haldane Army Reforms of 1906-12, Army Order AO162 of 1909 stipulated that each infantry battalion of the Home Establishment must include a proportion of trained mounted infantrymen. Training took place at Longmoor Camp in Hampshire; the first brick built barracks being completed in 1907 and named Louisburg barracks. They housed two regiments of artillery and a riding school with a veterinary hospital complete with 24 loose boxes and 20 stalls, to care for sick artillery horses. William Nicholson attended two training courses there – 16 March to 2 June 1909 and 1 October 1909 to 31 January 1910. His certificates read 'Longmoor Qualified Passed Mounted Infantry'; and the latter, signed by Major H. Clarke 1st Bn Cameron Highlanders, has the additional 'Qualified for Groom in Civic Life'.

A 1906 manual entitled *Mounted Infantry Training* issued by the General Staff of the War Office London, specified that soldiers selected for such training should have previously been thoroughly schooled as infantry; be 'good shots', active and 'not too heavy'. The course would teach them to ride well, be good horsemasters and perform 'mounted evolutions' so that they would be able to 'reap the full advantage of the mobility afforded them by horses'. The three months training course encompassed stable discipline, equitation, drill and evolution tactical employment, miscellaneous and ceremonial duties. Each infantry battalion and all schools of instruction had to keep a register (Army Book 313) of qualified mounted infantry men. The manual was already out of date before publication – the length of training being one example. Two photographs of William Nicholson possibly taken while at the training camp or later in northern France, show him wearing a mounted infantry uniform.² He is wearing spurs, a practice forbidden by the Training Manual.

² The postcard photograph has 'Carte Postale' printed on the back.



The year 1912, however, effectively saw the end of the mounted infantry with the substitution of regular cavalry as divisional troops for the British Expeditionary Force infantry. At some point in his military career Nicholson learned to drive a motor vehicle.

In 1912 William Nicholson's marriage certificate and birth and death certificates of his son record his address as 'Cameron's Barracks Inverness', as does the death certificate of his wife on 29 April 1914. By this time he had the position of 'servant' or 'batman' to Captain John Robert Campbell Heathcote (1879-1947) who had served in Egypt, South Africa, Gibraltar, Hong Kong and China where he was mauled by a tiger, before being posted in 1910 to the 3rd battalion at Inverness. The term 'batman' seems to have derived from *bât*, a packsaddle, and indicated a soldier assigned to a commissioned officer as a personal servant and paid by the officer for the duties carried out. These often included valet service, groom service, vehicle driving, cooking, acting as messenger and bodyguard in combat; and it was not unusual for a batman to continue to work for his officer in later civilian life. The position, usually regarded as desirable, was generally phased out after 1918. In his testimonial of 12 July 1914, Heathcote stated that 'No 7997 Pt William Nicholson has been my servant since 1 January 1913. He is leaving me as his service with the Colours has expired and he is going to the Reserve'. Service in the Reserve would have entailed another 5 years and Nicholson did serve that length of time but not in the Reserve.

Following the outbreak of war on 4 August 1914, Lord Kitchener became Secretary of State for War and, foreseeing a long war, began organising a volunteer army. On 25 August 1914 Lieutenant Colonel Donald Walter Cameron of Lochiel, Chief of Clan Cameron and commanding officer of the 3rd Battalion (Reserves) Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, wrote to the editors of Scottish newspapers:

I have been commissioned by the King to raise a new battalion of the Cameron Highlanders for Lord Kitchener's army for service during the present war. This new battalion will have as a nucleus a selected detachment of my own men from the 3rd Battalion, and will be composed, so far as possible, exclusively of Highlanders. The term of service is for the duration of the War, with a maximum engagement of three years. The battalion will be commanded by myself, and officered by representatives of the leading Clans in Inverness-shire, and when fully trained will go out as a complete unit, forming part of the Highland Brigade.

I want to raise a thousand Highlanders for my battalion, and I have no doubt I shall have little difficulty in so doing; but, having regard to the fact that Highlanders are now scattered all over the face of the earth, I must especially appeal to the officials and committee of the different Highland county and clan societies in Glasgow, Edinburgh, and elsewhere to assist me in my endeavour by becoming my recruiting agent. Any young man of Highland birth or parentage, of good physique and having good teeth, between the ages of 19 and 30, who wishes to serve under me in the defence of his country and for the rights of liberty against military oppression should apply to the nearest recruiting office or Post Office for a warrant to Inverness.

I give my personal guarantee that at the end of the war the battalion will be brought back to Inverness, where it will be disbanded with all convenient dispatch. The companies and platoons will be organised according to local districts, so that men from each district of the Highlands will always be kept together in their own section, platoon, or company. In view of the fact that I am expecting Highlanders from all parts of the globe to flock once again to the untarnished standard of the Camerons, all eligible young men should take the earliest opportunity of coming forward to enlist. Highlanders who are over 30 can assist by helping me to recruit, and should put themselves in touch with Lieutenant-Colonel Gunn, The Castle, Edinburgh, as soon as possible.

I shall be very grateful if you will assist me by publishing this letter in your valuable columns.

It was the equivalent of the 'fiery cross' as Lochiel acknowledged in a letter of thanks for 'the magnificent response'.

I do not suppose there has ever been such a response since the days of the '45. Already we have succeeded in filling two battalions, and another is in the course of formation, and if the necessary arrangements can be made for the transportation of the 500 men of the Cameron Highlanders of Canada who have expressed their willingness to serve, a brigade is in sight. I should however explain that the battalions will not serve together as a brigade as this would be impracticable. Each battalion will form a unit in a Highland brigade in each of Lord Kitchener's respective armies.

On 26 August 1914 Lochiel was in Inverness where for the first time he met Lieutenant James Syme Drew of the 2nd Battalion, appointed on 28 August as Adjutant to the new 5th battalion, part of the first (K1) of Kitchener's new armies. J. S. Drew (1883-1955), younger son of Thomas Drew, chairman of Andrew Drew and sons calico printers in Manchester, had two Scottish grandfathers – Alexander Drew of Creggandaroch and James Syme of Edinburgh. Educated at Harrow, he joined the Camerons as 2nd Lieutenant on 18 January 1902, being promoted to Lieutenant

on 26 May 1905 and Captain on 17 September 1914. William Nicholson became his batman and in Drew's words written on 25 January 1919 – 'I have known Pt. Nicholson since 1914 and we have served together since that date throughout the war'. On 28 August 1914 Lochiel with a complement of officers of the 3rd Battalion and 235 non commissioned officers and men, proceeded to Aldershot in Hampshire to form the nucleus of the new 5th (Service) Battalion.³

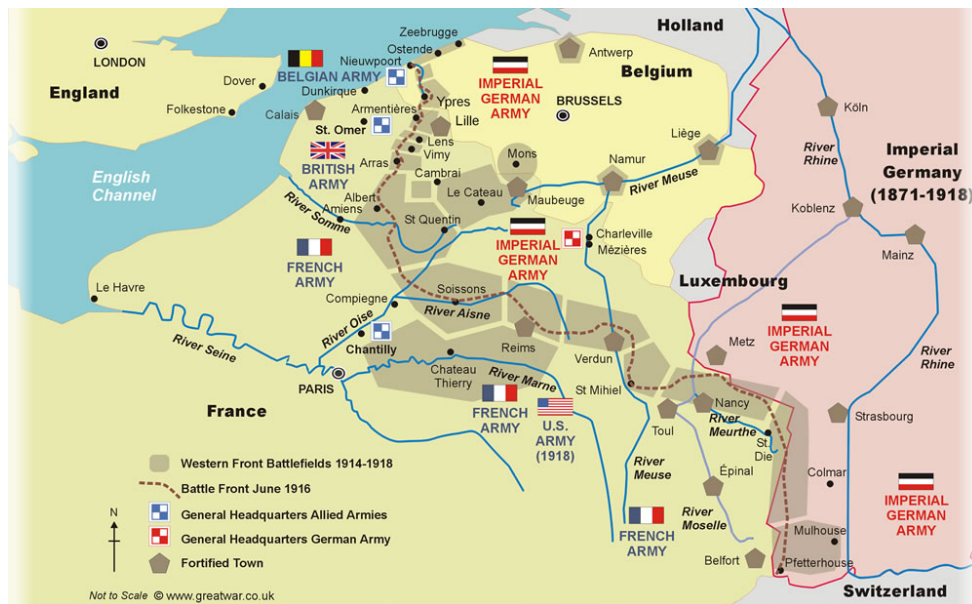
Comprising a Headquarters and four Companies, a Battalion, usually commanded by an officer with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel with a Major as Second-in-Command, constituted the basic tactical unit of the infantry of the British Army in the 1914-1918 war. Located in Battalion Headquarters, the Adjutant had charge of battalion administration and operations and acted as the Commanding Officer's chief Aide and channel of his commands. HQ staff included two other officers – a Captain or Lieutenant as Quartermaster (responsible for stores and transport) and an officer of the Royal Army Medical Corps as Medical Officer. Other HQ personnel consisted of the Regimental Sergeant-Major (RSM, the most senior Non-Commissioned Officer) and specialist posts filled by Sergeants, namely Quartermaster, Drummer, Cook, Pioneer, Shoemaker, Transport, Signaller, Armourer (usually attached from the Army Ordnance Corps) and Orderly Room Clerk. Numbers of corporals and privates undertook water and sanitary duties; others acted as signallers, pioneers (construction, repair and general engineering) drivers for the horse-drawn transport, stretcher-bearers (often the band musicians), batmen and orderlies for the Medical Officer. William Nicholson would have been part of the 5th Battalion Headquarters serving wherever Major Drew was located. Major H. R. Brown (2nd in Command), Lieutenant D. C. Alexander, Medical Officer, 2nd Lieutenant F. A. Roughed, Transport Officer and Lieutenant D. Cameron as Quartermaster were Drew's fellow officers.

³ Captain J. R. C. Heathcote became a Flying Officer in the Royal Flying Corps Military Wing having attained a French flying certificate and by 1916 he commanded No 16 Squadron, 9th HQ Wing.



Major-General Sir James Syme Drew, September 1944
National Portrait Gallery, Walter Stoneman, bromide print, NPGx167256.

For the next six months, serving Camerons and the new recruits underwent training; being located in April 1915 in the Martinique Barracks Bordon Hampshire. Orders to mobilise came on 6 May and the first trainload of troops left on 9 May. At 6.50 pm on 10 May, HQ and A and B companies – a total of 15 officers and 487 other ranks – departed by rail, followed at 7.15 pm by the 11 officers and 450 men of C and D companies. On 11 May, HQ and the companies landed at Boulogne and marched three miles to Pont-de-Briques from where they travelled by rail to billets in the Arques-Blendeques area. Before marching 11 miles in 4 columns to billets in the vicinity of Staples on 16 May, they had sustained 10 casualties. Next day entailed a march of 10 miles to Bailleul via Caestre and Flêtre, with one casualty; two more including a cook being lost before 24 May when they marched to the 'Blue Blind Factory'. Six officers and 12 non commissioned officers (NCOs) went into the trenches of the 19th Infantry Brigade and 2 composite companies into the trenches of the 1st Middlesex and 1st Cameronians on 25 May. Next day 530 men returned to billets at Bailleul before marching to Nieppe at 5.00 am next day where C Company dug trenches.



<http://www.greatwar.co.uk/places/ww1-western-front.htm#mapwesternfront>

The 5th Battalion Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders formed part of the 26th Brigade of the 9th (Scottish) Division of Kitchener's New Army formation along with the 27th (Lowland) Brigade and the 28th Brigade. The 26th (Highland) Brigade encompassed battalions of the Black Watch, Seaforth Highlanders, Gordon Highlanders and Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, as well as cavalry from the Queen's Own Royal Glasgow Yeomanry, Cyclists, Royal Artillery, Royal Engineers, Pioneers, Machine Gun Corps, Army Service Corps, Royal Army Medical Corps, Ordnance and Veterinary Section; and the Brigade was joined by South African Infantry and the Royal Newfoundland Regiment.

From Nieppe the 5th Battalion Camerons with the rest of the 26th Infantry, moved on 3 June to billets at Steenwerck where they relieved the 27th infantry and from there they marched 22 miles to Lilliers through the night of 5/6 June, billeting at Ecquedecques until 13 June. The next destination was Allouagne where heavy shelling could be heard and until 23 June the Battalion had orders to be ready at three hours 'notice', but on 20 June this was cancelled and the force moved six miles to Annezin on 24 June. Following orders to relieve the 4th Guards Brigade in the vicinity of Cambron, Lochiel and Drew visited the trenches there. On 26 June the Camerons' first line was transported to Sailly but having commenced taking over the trenches the order was cancelled and the Battalion moved five miles to Gonnehem. Lochiel, Drew and the Machine Gun Officer then reconnoitred the trenches in the vicinity of Festubert held by the 4th Cameron Highlanders whom the 5th Camerons

relieved by midnight on 20 June while the Transport and Reserve troops went to Le Touret billets.

As the trenches proved unsafe and insanitary, the men had little sleep as they worked to improve conditions to a background of intermittent shelling which had become more frequent and accurate by 4 July when D Company of the 8th Black Watch relieved the Camerons' B Company. Following heavy shelling on 5 July and the dispersal of a German working party, the Battalion moved five miles to Pacaut for rest until transferring to the Brigade reserve at Gorre on 14 July. While moving from billets to relieve the Seaforths on 21 July one man was hit but a further seven were killed and three wounded the next day; HQ being shelled daily. Over the next few days hostile snipers killed one man and wounded six others working on the wire and burying bodies before the 7th Seaforths took over on 30 June.

On 1 August A and B Companies moved into trenches at Estament while C and D Companies and HQ went to Le Touret in the Divisional Reserve taking over from the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and remaining there until returning to the trenches at the Orchards on 6 August. Snipers, hand, rifle grenades and shelling caused several casualties until the men were sent back to the Reserve trenches on 11 August when the Prince of Wales made a visit. In the 1960s William Nicholson mentioned that the Prince had passed through the trenches though he did not give a date. Improvement work carried out on the trenches included strengthening parapets and completing new dug-outs, latrines and washhouses while coping with blue bottles, mosquitoes, rats and rain. On 16 August the Camerons moved to billets at La Tombe then to Robecq where Lord Kitchener inspected the Division and where they remained until 1 September, moving from there to Gonnehem on 1 September and to Saily la Bourse next day. Here they remained, digging trenches and strengthening parapets until transferred to trenches at Vermilles on 11 September.

The Battalion HQ was situated in a place known as 'The Quarry' in a depression in the ground which resembled a huge shell crater immediately to the rear of the support line. Some shelling took place, torpedoes encountered and some casualties suffered before the Black Watch took over on 15 September. Time was spent in transporting gas cylinders, each of which required two men to carry. Until this point the 5th had not taken part in any major encounter but this was soon to change as the 26th Brigade had been given one of the most daunting tasks of the forthcoming battle of Loos. On 21 September at 6.30 am bombardment of the

German lines began and at 8.30 am the Camerons moved into the trenches at Sailly, taking up positions in the front line at Vermelles on 24 September ready for the attack timed for 6.30 am the next day. In this well documented battle of Loos, fought among the slag heaps and colliery towers of a coal mining area, British troops used gas for the first time as part of the pre-attack bombardment and encountered the hazards when the wind did not clear the smoke.



<http://www.webmatters.net/txtpat/?id=711>

The 5th Battalion advanced in three lines with A and B Companies in two lines of half companies, C in the 3rd line; D being Reserve with HQ lines and MG in the rear – a total of about 820 men. At 7.10 am the first two lines passed the first German trench (Little Willie) and D Co was sent forward to occupy the German main line trench (Fosse) but by 7.30 am when HQ advanced heavy enfilade machine gun and rifle fire had practically wiped out the first two lines. With HQ the remainder pushed forward and reached miners' cottages at the southwest corner of Corons where 250 Black Watch arrived in support. At 8.00 am a conference took place with the 7th Seaforths who had gained their objective and the Camerons HQ was established at the corner of the Slag Heap but due to heavy shelling it moved to the Manager's House. By this time the only officers of the Battalion remaining were the CO Lochiel and the Adjutant Drew with about 80 NCOs and men who presumably included William Nicholson.

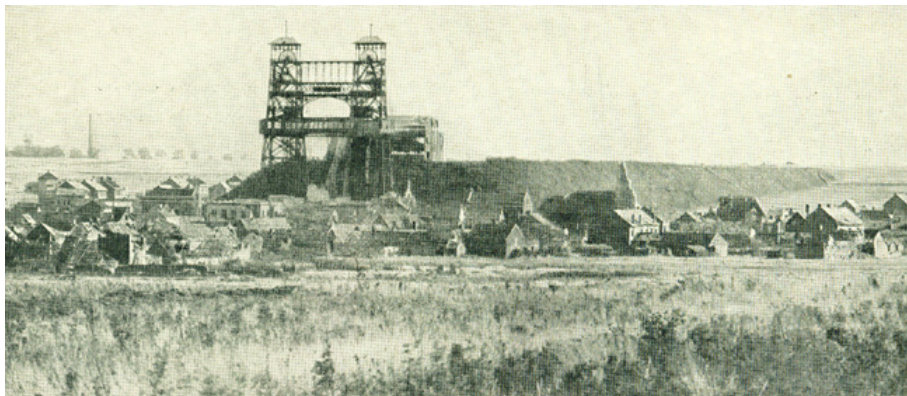
Lochiel recounted later:

These were moments which can never be forgotten, and undoubtedly will tend to bind closer the very friendly ties which have always existed between the Camerons and the Seaforths. Defending what we had taken, we remained on here until we were relieved by another

Brigade early the following morning. On the 26th we remained in our trenches all day, but on the afternoon of the 27th the battalion was ordered again to charge to reinforce the brigade in front of us who were being hard pressed by the Germans. This last charge was probably the finest thing a battalion had ever done, because the ranks, enormously attenuated in the action of the 25th, had on this occasion to go forward with few officers to lead them. As it was, they went forward out of their trenches as though nothing had happened in absolutely perfect alignment as if on parade.

This charge having had the desired effect, the battalion was withdrawn into billets early the next morning. It was addressed by Sir John French, who thanked us for what we had done; but what pleased the men most was the words used by the Brigadier when he said that from Sir John French downwards, amongst those who had been out during the whole war, nothing finer had been seen than the advance of the Camerons through that bullet-swept zone on the morning of the 25th. It was at once the saddest and the proudest day of my life. I do not suppose any Commanding Officer ever, in the annals of the British Army, had better or braver men to serve under him, and Inverness-shire may rest absolutely contented that the Highlanders of the 5th Battalion proved themselves in every way worthy of their gallant forefathers. In saying this, I do not underrate the part played in the advance by the Highland Brigade as a whole, and when the story comes to be written, the country will doubtless learn how valiantly each unit fought.⁴

In the action the 9th (Scottish) Division lost 6,058 men of whom 190 were officers.



The mining town of Loos



The pit buildings at Fosse 8
<http://www.1914-18.net/bat13.htm>

The remnants of the 5th Battalion moved by motor lorries to Bethune on 28 September and by rail to Poperinghe on 30 September where they remained in the

⁴ *Scotsman*, 15 October 1915.

Divisional Reserve until transferring to Hollebek where HQ was established at Bedford House, the name given by the British to the Château Rosendal. By 10 October the troops were back in unwired trenches near Hill 60, 25 yards from the enemy in some places, where they heard reports of an enemy attack from St Eloi. In spite of shelling and exploding mines, no attack came though the men stood to arms from 1.30 am till dawn. At 3.30 pm on 18 October the Battalion's HQ was shelled; a direct hit being made on a dressing station killing a sergeant and private and forcing the moving of HQ. Relief came on 23 October and the Battalion moved to huts in Dickebusch and remained in billets until 31 October when Lochiel had to be evacuated to hospital. Later he gave an account of the Battalion's experiences at the front during an entertainment at Inverness in aid of the Camerons' Comforts Fund. Following the battle of Loos:

When next the Battalion went into the trenches, joined by drafts from home, they spent two months there and those two months it was quite impossible to describe. He was sent home invalided and the Earl of Seafield took his place until his death after which the command was taken by Sir Schomberg McDonnell who in ten days' time was also killed. When he (Lochiel) got back to the Battalion it was a very different Battalion: but from all he had seen at the front he was impressed with the truth that the real hero of the war is the private soldier.⁵

This period in the trenches was one of almost unmitigated gloom and discomfort due to the rain and mud with the rest huts at Dickebusch and Canada Huts draughty and leaking. The issued thigh- long gumboots helped to keep feet dry but not warm and in spite of whale-oil and anti-frost bite grease, many suffered from 'trench feet'. William Nicholson probably escaped the worst of this as on 7 November Lieutenant General Furse, commanding officer of the 9th Division set up a training school for junior officers at Poperinghe with the double purpose of promoting training and encouraging esprit de corps. Captain Drew was sent to assist the first Commandant Lieutenant Colonel Loch in delivering theoretical and practical training which seems to have greatly increased the efficiency of the Division. On 1 January 1916 Drew had been mentioned in despatches and he received the Military Cross as recognition for his efforts at Loos. By 25 January 1916, however, he had returned to the Battalion which had been in respite in billets around Merris (from 20 December 1914-24 January 1916) but now back in the trenches around Ploegsteert.

Farmers still worked in this area, the front trenches east of Ploegsteert Wood were comparatively good and reliefs could be carried out in daylight though

⁵ Cameron Highlanders Association, *79th News*, No.136 (Inverness, October 1916), p. 326.

intermittent shelling and trench bombardment occurred. By this time Lochiel's health had broken and on medical recommendation he relinquished command to Lieutenant Colonel Duff and was invalided home on 3 March. Due to the lack of recruits the brigades were reorganised; the 9th Division losing the 8th Gordons, 6th Royal Scot Fusiliers and the 10th and 11th Highland Light Infantry but acquiring the South African Brigade. The Argylls were transferred to the 26th Brigade and Captain Drew 'whose fame as adjutant had spread far beyond the confines of the battalion itself' now became a Major of the 26th Brigade.⁶ The 5th Battalion notes recorded:

We knew we could not keep him always (and rumour has it he refused many good appointments) but none the less we do regret his departure. We are however lucky in the fact that he still remains in our Brigade. There is not a man in the Battalion who does not know of the almost superhuman work he did during the battle of Loos and afterwards at the Salient. It did not matter what was happening or how bad things looked, our Adjutant was always calm and undisturbed. A partridge wasn't in it with him when there was a piece of orange peel, a stray match, or cigarette end to be found anywhere in the trenches. All think he should have received a better decoration than the MC, but perhaps the powers that be think that the DSO to come will look better beside the Military Cross than if the DSO was in solitary state.⁷

A brigade major, the chief of staff, had responsibility for the brigade's 'G-Operations and Intelligence' section directly; oversaw the two other branches, 'A-Administration' and 'Q-Quartermaster'; and expanded, detailed and executed the intentions of the commanding brigadier. He had a key role, being in most frequent contact with the front-line troops and responsible for the planning of brigade operations.

The soldiers considered Ploegsteert a 'cushy' spot with concerts every week and the occasional Charlie Chaplin movie. A dinner for 120 in the recreation hut on 10 May 1916 marked the anniversary of the arrival of the 5th Battalion Camerons in France. Led in by Pipe-Major Beattie, Drew's arrival resulted in the whole gathering standing up and singing 'For he's a jolly good fellow'. Drew presented two tenor drums to the Battalion.⁸ On 27 May, however, the 9th Division moved to billets near Bomy and from there to Vaux-en-Amienois in the Somme Department of Picardy on 11 June, joining the XIII Corps of the 4th Army and receiving instructions on 15 June for the forthcoming attack in which they would be in Reserve. Further moves to Corbie then Etenhem ended at Grovetown on 27 June but the assault planned for 29 June had to be postponed because of bad weather, taking place instead on 1 July. The 27th and South African Brigades went into action on 2 July but the 26th Brigade

⁶ J. H. F. McEwan, *The Fifth Camerons* (Edinburgh, 1938), pp. 61-2.

⁷ *79th News*, No 134, April 1916, p. 149.

⁸ *Ibid*, No 135, July 1916, p. 225.

remained in Reserve until the order came on 12 July for attack on 14 July – Longueval and Delville Wood.



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Delville_Wood

The Brigade marshalled on the northern slopes of Caterpillar Valley and on the path leading from Montauban to Longueval. Four platoons with two Lewis guns took position on the crest of plateau then Major Drew with the Adjutants of the Black Watch and the Argylls and 40 markers went out to mark off the ground.

The left markers of the Black Watch moved up Bernafay-Longueval road and the left of the Argylls up the Montauban-Longueval path – 16 markers of the former commencing from the rear were posted in pairs at 70 yards' distance along the first of these roads. When done the front couple had reached a point about 500 yards from the enemy front line. As each pair was posted one man moved off at right angles with a tape about 150 yards long and thus fixed the right of his wave or platoon.⁹

The Argylls did the same and at 12.25 am the battalions moved by companies in single file to line upon the markers and as each platoon reached its left marker it wheeled to the right and fixed bayonets; all being in place by 3.00 am. Twenty minutes later the barrage began. At first, communications between DHQ and the leading infantry worked well in spite of incessant shelling but information became inaccurate and the 26th and 27th Brigades suffered severely. The 26th made progress but failed to secure Waterlot Farm and had to withdraw to the north end of Longueval Valley where it spent 16 July consolidating and strengthening its defences and establishing posts on the west of Waterlot Farm.

⁹ John Ewing, *The History of the 9th (Scottish) Division 1914-1919* (London, 1921), p.109.



Official British Military drawing first published in H. W. Wilson (ed.) *The Great War*, 1917
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Delville_Wood

The South African Brigade had attacked Delville Wood with devastating losses and Lieutenant Colonel Thackeray asked to be relieved. He received a message from Major Drew to say that as soon as 19th DLI (Durham Light Infantry) had relieved them they were to rejoin their Brigade.¹⁰ The South Africans held the wood until 19 July as for some unknown reason the 53rd Brigade failed to relieve them though asked to do so by the 26th Brigade, but by this time all communications had broken.

During the night of 19 July relief began and the remnants of the 26th withdrew to Carnoy and then to the sandpits near Meaulte. The 9th Division had lost 314 officers and 7303 other ranks – about 50% of its strength with infantry losses proportionately greater. This may have been the occasion when William Nicholson received a shrapnel wound in his shoulder but unwilling to risk losing his batman position he asked the medical officer to patch him up and he carried on. In the 1960s he had the bullet removed in Newcastle General Hospital by which time it had travelled to form a lump in his side; and which made him something of a celebrity among the medical students who examined him. When asked why he had not had the bullet removed he replied: 'You see son, there was a war on at the time and we were kinda busy'!

On 23 July the 9th Division moved to the Pont Remy area and then to the mining town of Bruay until the 26th Brigade took over the trenches on Vimy Ridge with the DHQ at Camblain L'Abbé. Routine operations consisted of 12 days at the

¹⁰ I.S. Vys, *Delville Wood: Gethsemane for the South African Brigade*,
www.worldwar1.com/heritage/delville.htm

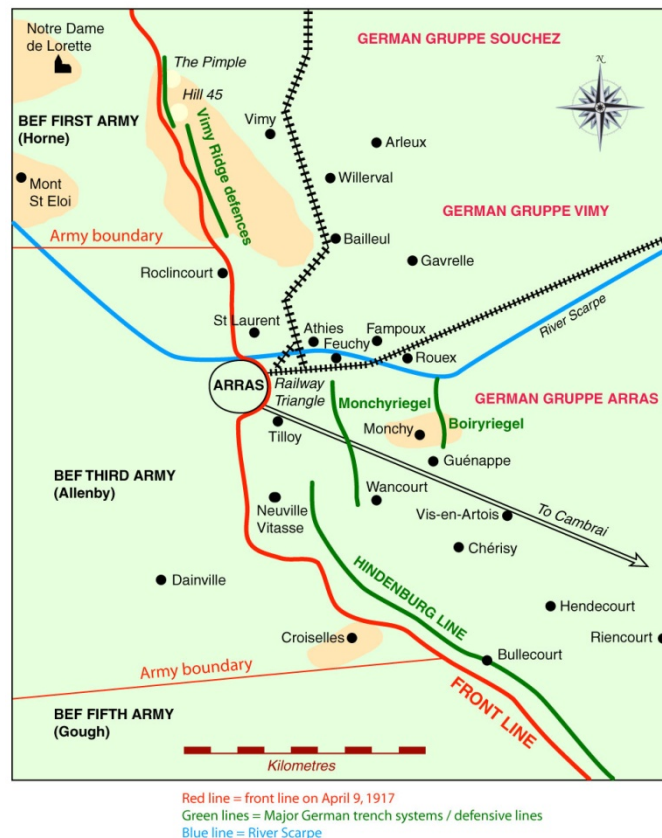
front, six in the Brigade Reserve and six in Divisional billets; the next offensive taking place in October in the area of Eaucourt L'Abbaye where the objective was to clear Butte de Warlencourt, an ancient burial mound alongside the Albert-Bapaume road, north-east of the village of Le Sars in the Somme district.



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butte_de_Warlencourt

The Camerons led the 26th Brigade attack on 18 October through ankle and waist deep mud, managing to hold the line until relieved on 24 October. Because of the conditions it took eight men rather than two to carry a stretcher and more men were lost from illness and explosives than from wounds and death in this unsuccessful action.

On 23 November the 9th Division transferred from the 4th to the 3rd Army and on 5 December took over the line north east of Arras from the south of the Scarpe to Rochincourt which was held until 9 April 1917. The troops experienced the driest winter of the war with hard frost in January and February 1917, heavy gas bombardment and casualties averaging 30 weekly. On 9 April the Division received the command to take the enemy's position from Point du Jour (a house on the road between St Laurent-Blangy and Gavrelle) to Scarpe and to consolidate a line leading from the eastern end of Athies to Point du Jour. The 26th, 27th and South African Brigades had each to attack on a frontage of about 600 yards and none at full strength and this they achieved successfully. However blizzards of snow and sleet ensued and the attempt of the 26th Brigade to capture Mt Pleasant Wood and the village of Roeux ended in disaster.



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Arras_\(1917\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Arras_(1917))

Following a sojourn in billets near Hermaville, the 26th Brigade returned to the front and participated in the attack on 3 May. Relieved on 9-11 May it billeted near Ruellcourt until rejoining the line at the beginning of June. The 9th Division spent the last day in the Arras sector on 12 June, having sustained 5000 casualties in two months. Out of line from 13 June to 26 July the Division transferred to the IV Corps on 25 July, to the desolation of Bapaume and the 26th Brigade spent a relatively uneventful month in heavy rain in the line south of the Canal du Nord at Havrincourt. Following relief the next destination was Achiet le Grand and then on 12 September, camps between Poperighe and Ypres where preparations were being made for an assault on Passchendaele. On 20 September the 9th Division's line lay 15000 yards along the Frezenberg Ridge which it captured and held until relieved on 24 September to move to Arneke until transferred to Brake Camp on 9 October to await orders for the attack in rain and mud on 12 October on the new north end of Passchendaele Ridge. The operation floundered in the mud and gas as communications broke down with the wind proving too strong for the carrier pigeons and the message dog handlers becoming casualties. The 26th Brigade was

withdrawn on 13/14 October but the Division held the line until 24 October when relieved to various camps near Ypres thus ending its share of the 1917 fighting.

Previously mentioned in despatches in November 1916, Major J. S. Drew warranted further mentions in January, May and November 1917 and he received a DSO for distinguished service in the field in June of that year. From location in the Wormhoudt area on 25 October and the coast in Nieuport sector on the following day, Drew's Brigade relieved the 45th Division in line where Dunkirk suffered nightly bombing. Further orders came on 11 November and the 9th Division moved to Fruges; travelling by rail to Péronne on 30 November. By 5 December all three Brigades were in the line extending from Gauche Wood to Chapel Crossing. Here they remained until the end of January 1918 in snow, liquid snow and mud, with gas attacks and shelling. From 1 February the Division remained out of line for six weeks, undertaking training and work on the railways and rear defences. On 25 February 1918, however, Major Drew became a temporary Lieutenant Colonel and took up a Special Appointment as Chief Instructor Senior Officers School at Aldershot on 4 March, holding this until 15 September 1918. During this period he married Victoria Maxwell, youngest daughter of William Jardine Herries Maxwell of Munches Kirkcudbright on 19 April. William Nicholson married May Johnston Keith, dressmaker at Lennox Street Edinburgh on 21 June 1918.



William and May Nicholson, Elizabeth Lindsay(Nicholson) and James Malcolm Keith

Drew's service record lists him as serving in France from 3-13 November 1918 as a GSO2 (General Staff Officer Grade 2), a rank he attained in February 1917, but on 14 November 1918 he received a temporary upgrade to GSO1 with the title of Lieutenant Colonel. When he wrote the testimonial for William Nicholson on 25 January 1919, he gave his location as 29th Divisional Headquarters. The 29th Division had been at Flobecq and Lessines after the Armistice on 11 November 1918 and along with the 9th Division, was chosen to lead the advance into Germany. The 9th Division, at Harlebeke on 9 November, began this on 14 November with the 29th following on 18 November, marching in four groups on two parallel roads. There had been no time for re-equipping the troops some of whom marched without soles on their boots, travelling up to 20 miles a day on bad roads and in appalling weather. The route took them from Enghien to Tubize and they marched across the field of Waterloo on 23 November, Ramillies next, traversing the Meuse at Huy, then advancing through the Ardennes by Spa to the frontier at Stavelot which they reached on 4 December. From Malmédy they travelled to the outskirts of Cologne, arriving on 9 December. The ceremonial crossing of the Rhine took place on 13 December in pouring rain; the 29th Division using the Hohenzollern Bridge, the 9th Division the Mülheim Bridge and the Canadians the New Bridge. General Plumer took the salute at 9.30 am under the statue of the Kaiser where a Union Jack flew; and the march lasted four hours in passing this spot. Over the next few days the final positions on the bridgehead perimeter were taken up 20 miles northeast of Cologne and gradually demobilization got underway with battalions of young soldiers sent from home replacing the seasoned troops.



The Imperial War Museum has a newsreel of this <<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/>>.

From the date on his testimonial of 25 January 1919 William Nicholson must have been among those who began the demobilisation process at the end of January 1919 although he did not receive his discharge papers until 19 August 1919. Signed at Perth by Lieutenant J. Rogerson, Infantry Records, No 1 District, these state that Pt 7997 Nicholson Cameron Highlanders had served with the colours for 12 years 9 months; his medical category being A1 and his Specialist Military Qualifications denoted as 'Mtd Inf Duties'. Lieutenant Colonel Drew had written:

He has ever proved himself to be capable and reliable and absolutely trust worthy and temperate in every way. I can not give him other than the highest recommendation and hope that this may assist him to early and good employment.

Before the outbreak of war Captain Heathcote stated that Pt Nicholson was:

A smart, clean soldier and I have always found him honest, sober and straightforward. He does his work well. He is a good leader. I have no hesitation in recommending him for employment in civilian life. I have always found him a very handy man. I shall always be very pleased to answer any questions anyone may care to ask me about him.

In later life William Nicholson commented that fellow soldiers had regarded him as 'lucky' and said 'we're coming with you'. He cited as an example the occasion of an 'entertainment' in a barn – he left and shortly afterwards the barn was shelled killing all the occupants. He refused promotion and won no medals apart from the standard one issued bearing the legend 'The Great War for Civilisation 1914-1919'. Perhaps as a professional soldier he knew how to keep his head down and this was the key to survival. Perhaps he just was 'lucky'.

Appendix

Thomas Nicholson



Thomas Nicholson and unidentified girlfriend

William Nicholson's brother Thomas (born 1884) served in the 2nd battalion Cameron Highlanders as Private 22166. He was recorded as wounded at Salonika in the April edition of 79th News (No 139) and he died on 11 February 1918 from chronic malaria combined with epilepsy (major).¹¹



The Carte Postale is addressed to Mrs Nicholson 17 Drumdryan Street Edinburgh and bears the message 'Best Wishes from Salonika'.

He is commemorated in Salonika (Lembert Road) military cemetery.



¹¹ 79th News (no 141) April 1918, p. 56; Scotsman, 6 March 1918.

William Keith

Born 14 May 1894, brother of May Keith, wife of William Nicholson, served as Gunner 837127 in the 307th Brigade of the Royal Field Artillery. Aged 23 years he died on 14 September 1917 of wounds received in action.¹² He is commemorated in Mendinghem Military Cemetery, West Vlaanderen Belgium. His mother Annie Keith lived at 82 Dumbiedykes Road Edinburgh.



Mendinghem Military Cemetery

Principal Sources

Family papers

Details about troop movements and actions came from:

Cameron Highlanders Association, *79th News* (Inverness, 1914-19).

General Staff of the War Office, *Mounted Infantry Training* (London, 1906).

Gillon, Stair, *The Story of the 29th Division* (London, 1925).

McEwan, J. H. F. *The Fifth Camerons* (Edinburgh, 1938).

Ewing, John, *The History of the 9th (Scottish) Division 1914-1919* (London, 1921).
Scotsman.

Vys, I. S., *Delville Wood: Gethsemene for the South African Brigade*,
<<http://www.worldwar1.com/heritage/delville.htm>>

Information about James Syme Drew came from the above and:

¹² He may have been wounded in the efforts to push the line forward at positions around Schuler Farm and Aisne Farm near Kerselaar during the 3rd Battle of Ypres.

Gradation List of Officers of the British Army

<<http://content.mocavo-cdn.com/assets/360897/34-thu...>>

Burnley Express, 16 January 1917.

Glasgow Herald, 28 June 1955.

Information about John Robert Campbell Heathcote came from:

<<http://www.apw.airwall.org.uk/no2sqn3.htm>>

<<http://www.thepeerage.com/p42193.htm>>

His medals were sold for £980 at auction on 17 September 2004.

<<http://www.dnw.co.uk/auction-archive/catalogue-archive/lot.php?...>>

There are numbers of web sites giving information about WW1 and specific battles, for example:

<<http://www.1914-1918.net/>>

<https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=first+world+war&biw=1024&bih=484&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=J1AIVMnvGs_g7QbcyYDYBA&sqi=2&ved=0CEoQsAQ>

<<http://www.greatwar.co.uk/battles/>>

<<http://www.worldwar1postcards.com/the-story-behind-a-ww1-postcard.php>>

WW1 discussion groups and forums can also supply interesting details, for example:

<<http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/index.php>>

There are also numbers of sites giving information about cemeteries, for example,

<http://www.ww1wargraves.co.uk/ww1_cemeteries/index.asp>

<<http://www.everymanremembered.org/>>