



Thomas Arthur AIREY Private, 8109, 14th (County of London) Battalion (1st London Scottish)

It is a poignant testimony to the sacrifice made by the old pupils of Queen Elizabeth Grammar School, during the First World War, that the very first name listed on the memorial lost his life in one of the most infamous battles of the conflict: The Somme. Thomas Arthur Airey, a hard-working QES, scholar who had won a place at Christ Collage, Cambridge, found himself embroiled in action at Gommecourt on the 1st July 1916. The attack here was to be a diversion, aimed to draw fire from the main Somme battlefield. At 'Zero Hour', 7:30 A.M., Airey advanced across no-mans land with the 14th (County of London) Battalion (1st London Scottish), which was part of the 56th London Division, and despite the developing disaster occurring across the rest of the front, his Battalion made it to their objectives of the German Front line trenches. In fact what the London Division achieved within the first hour is regarded as one of the successes of the Somme. The Division was regarded as the best Territorial formation in France at the time, and the soldiers that formed it were well-educated, intelligent men, who were earmarked to become officers in other divisions. This was certainly true of Airey. His QES education had stood him in good stead, and he was about to take his Theological Tripos at Cambridge when the war had erupted. Moreover, when he had joined up in January 1916, it was with the Artists' Rifles Officer Training Corps. He was clearly officer material, and it was only his eagerness to serve in the front line that had compelled him to volunteer for Foreign Service in France, and then transfer to the 1st London Scottish in June, without a commission. It was thus as a Private soldier that Airey found himself in the German front line trenches. Here the London Division held position, attempting to clear the trenches, and waiting for the 46th North Midland Division to join up with them. The link up never occurred, and it was during the fighting in these trenches that Airey lost his life. A letter from his platoon sergeant to Airey's mother described what happened to him:

"Dear Madam,

I am very, very sorry to tell you that your son was killed in action on July 1st. He was last seen in the first German line laying by the side of Corporal Briggs, my best pal. You will be pleased to know that he died fighting against tremendous odds, being killed by a German bomb whilst proceeding along the enemy front line trench.

As platoon sergeant and friend of your son I should like to offer you my deepest sympathy."

I am,

Yours Sincerely,

Harry Bell"

The London Division held on throughout the day, but was gradually forced back and eventually retired. The men had done what had been asked of them. The diversion had been successful, the German frontline trenches secured, and an attempted link up made with the other division. The cost, however, was great, and Airey's battalion had suffered immensely. Out of a force of 971 men, 616 were casualties, Airey amongst them. The London Scottish Medal Roll Sheet seems painfully telling with its stark dates relating to Airey. Served 05/03/1916 - 01/07/1916. He lasted just 4 months.

However, Airey had in fact been involved in the First World War prior to his military service. In spring 1915 he had volunteered to work in France with the Young Men's Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.), providing welfare services to the men. Entertainment, recreation and leisure amenities offered by the group helped to sustain military morale, which was undoubtedly of great value. A chance encounter in July 1915 certainly lifted the spirits of one soldier:

"We are very busy. I have been on from 6:00 am to 8:30 p.m. without a break for meals for 3 days. We have now got patients in and operations are an every day occurrence. Everything is kept in the cleanest condition. I had the greatest surprise last night. I went down to the Y.M.C.A. and who should be the first person I ran into but A. Airey. He has come on the staff of the Y.M.C.A. here. He was surprised. He has been here a week now...He looks a perfect brick. I shall be able to enjoy myself now with some Barbon here" (Private A. Robinson, Royal Army Medical Corps (R.A.M.C.))

Robinson was in fact a fellow QES old boy, and he too appears on the war memorial. Unlike Airey, however, Robinson was to survive the war. Patriotic fervour proved too great a pull for Airey who wrote in his diary, "I cannot continue with the Y.M.C.A. if I can get into the trenches." It was this impulse that led him to enlist, and before Gommecourt in July 1916 he made the ultimate sacrifice. Airey's body was never recovered, and he is remembered on the Thiepval Memorial.

Click on the images below to enlarge and for more information



Links

Thomas Arthur Airey's entry on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Website,
http://www.cwgc.org/search/casualty_details.aspx?casualty=772900

For more information on the work of the YMCA during the First World War see,
<http://www.worldwar1.com/dbc/ymca.htm>

For more information on the Battle of the Somme see,
<http://www.firstworldwar.com/battles/somme.htm>

For more information specifically on Gommecourt on 1st July 1916 see,
<http://www.gommecourt.co.uk/>