

SCOTS, bagpipes, kilts and courage

Blue Bonnets O'er the Border

25 SEPTEMBER 1915, the Battle of Loos. The deafening sound of bombs, bullets whistling through the air, and cries of pain and terror. Suddenly, a traditional Scottish sound seems to drown out the hail of bullets. Piper Daniel Laidlaw has climbed out of the trenches with his bagpipes to accompany his comrades towards the German lines.

"Play for them Laidlaw. For the love of God, play for them!" The piper plays Blue Bonnets O'er the Border then On the Braes O'Mar. Despite being hit twice in the leg, he continues to advance. When his comrades have achieved their target, he returns to the trench with his bagpipes. Piper Laidlaw's sortie is one of the more unusual episodes of the Great War. Having returned home alive from the conflict, Daniel Laidlaw played himself in the film *"The Guns of Loos"* in 1928, also appearing five years later in *"Forgotten Men"*. *"On 25 September 1915, my hair turned white in just a few hours"*, explained Daniel Laidlaw, who died in 1950. The piper of the 7th Battalion King's Own Scottish Borderers symbolises *"to a T"* the Scottish presence in the British army – a presence that hardly passed unnoticed given that Scottish soldiers wore their own uniform: a kilt, of course,

along with a leather sporran, and a beret on their heads. These soldiers made a real impression, so much so that the Germans referred to them as *"Damen von Hölle"*, the women from hell; the local population was astonished to come across them without any underwear! The *"women from hell"* was perhaps an apt term as courage and commitment epitomised the Scottish units in every battle they were involved in.

Close to 150,000 Scots died during the First World War, which represents 20% of British losses. To get an idea of the slaughter, a comparison needs to be made with Australia. Australia and Scotland each had a population of five million in 1914: 60,000 Australians died in 1914-18 compared with 147,000 Scots. The losses were huge during the Battle of Loos: 50% of the men in each of the eight battalions of the 15th Scottish Division who attacked the village and Hill 70.



*During the Great War, the Valenciennes artist Lucien Jonas (1880 - 1947) painted more than 2,000 sketches and portraits of Allied officers and soldiers, publishing a total of fifteen albums.
Photo: 'Three Scottish soldiers' (Hughes Chevalier private collection)*

23 August 1918 : the 2nd Battalion the Royal Scots attacks the Germans entrenched in Courcelles-le-Comte from the rear. The soldier Hugh McIver, a company runner, heads off alone to attack an enemy position. He kills six Germans, captures twenty more, and seizes two machine guns. When a British tank homes in on the wrong target, aiming at its own side, McIver climbs on to the vehicle and re-adjusts the shot – heroic acts which earned him the Victoria Cross, awarded posthumously to his parents in 1919 as Hugh McIver was killed on 2 September near the Bois de Vraucourt. He was 28 years old.

23 August 2008 : following considerable research, and as a result of the perseverance of Christophe Guéant, a keen local historian who for two years had received the support of The Somme Remembrance Association, Courcelles-le-Comte welcomed men from the 1st Battalion the Royal Regiment of Scotland and forty or so members of Hugh McIver's family, who had come to attend the inauguration of a "Franco-English-Scottish" memorial to honour the memory of this Scottish soldier, Hugh McIver (born in Linwood, Paisley), but also to "salute the sacrifice made by a generation for freedom".

IRISH, from the north and south

"united" in the trenches

UNIONISTS and Nationalists. Protestants and Catholics. North and South. An island divided, even more so after the bloody events of the 1916 "Easter Rising" in Dublin (the rebellion against the British occupation and the terrible repression that followed). However, a similar hell existed in the trenches for the 210,000 Irish who served in the British army during the First World War, in which 35,000 of them lost their lives. Yet, it wasn't until 1998 that, as a sign of reconciliation, the "Island of Ireland Peace Park" was inaugurated in Messines.

Having arrived in France at Le Havre from 18 December 1915 onwards, the 16th Irish Division had their first taste of the trenches in early 1916. From 27 to 29 April, it was fully engaged in the Battle of Hulluch, one of the battles of the Great War in which poisoned gas was used. During the German attack on 27 April, out of the 1,980 victims, 570 died, to be followed by numerous wounded later on as a result of respiratory problems. To incite the Irish, the Germans had placed posters in

front of the trenches recalling the events of the "Easter Rising" on 24 April. In August 1916, the 16th Division adopted new positions in the Somme. In June 1917, the Catholics from this 16th Division joined up with the Protestants from the 36th Ulster Division near Messines, taking the village of Wijtschate side-by-side on 7 June. Following action at Péronne and Hamel, the 16th Division was relieved in early April 1918, following an order for it to return to England via Aire-sur-la-Lys and Samer.

O'Leary, an Irish hero, was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions at Cwmchy



Posters proliferated to encourage the Irish both emigrants and those who had remained in the country to rejoin English, Canadian and Australian regiments etc.