

In Commemoration of the Ultimate Sacrifice of David Watson Howat
World War I Centennial
By His Distant Fourth Cousin, Michael T. Tracy

"I died in hell, they called it Passchendale." (Line from Memorial Tablet, poem by Lieutenant Siegfried Sassoon, Royal Welch Fusiliers, November 1918)



Moving in Marches upon Eveningtide

For the soldiers who fought at Passchendale like Lance Corporal David Watson Howat of the 1/6th (Territorial) Battalion of the Seaforth Highlanders it was known as the "Battle of Mud." He was one of 310,000 British casualties that would be sacrificed for the sake of a few kilometers of ground on the western front of France.

Early youth

David Watson Howat was born on 6 April 1895 in Markinch Parish, Fife.¹ He was the fourth son of Joseph Howat, a teacher of music and Catherine Watson of Markinch Parish, Fife. The Howat family later relocated to Grantown-on-Spey, Moray Parish in the Scottish Highlands. There, young David Howat attended grammar school and later was a cabinet maker and musical artiste.²

¹ Birth Record of David Watson Howat, 6 April 1895, Markinch Parish Records, Statutory Births, National Records of Scotland

² U.K. DeRuvigny's Roll of Honor 1914-1924. Ancestry.com. Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2009 p. 89

The Seaforth Highlanders

David W. Howat joined the Seaforth Highlander Territorials in April 1913 at the age of 18.³ The Territorials were called up on mobilization on the outbreak of war in August of 1914 and in April of 1915 the Seaforth Highlanders moved via Southampton to France.⁴ At the same time the brigades were renumbered and David W. Howat was now under the 152nd Infantry Brigade of the 51st Highland Division. No division of the line in the British Army that fought against Germany in the Great War came through the years of campaign in France and Flanders with more renown than the 51st.

By 19 May 1915 the 51st Highland Division advanced to the *Le Quinque Rue-Bethune* road and were consolidating their positions. This was the Division's first experience of digging into the Flanders mud where one could not dig down sufficiently because of the water and had also to build up breastworks to provide protection.⁵

The Battle of Festubert

David W. Howat would experience his first combat battle on 19 May 1915 in what became known as the Battle of Festubert on the Western Front. Wave after wave of infantry assaults were thrown at the German positions. Because of the British trench layouts, the front lines did not allow for easy movement of reinforcements and casualties thus affected the outcome of this battle. The 51st lost over 1,500 men.



Fig.1. Battle of Festubert Engagement Map, 51st Highland Division co.uk

³ U.K. DeRuvigny's Roll of Honor 1914-1924. Ancestry.com. Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2009 p. 89

⁴ 51st Highland Division. Assessed at 51hd.co.uk/history

⁵ 51st Highland Division. Assessed at 51hd.co.uk/history

The Battle of Givenchy (High Wood)

The 51st Highland Division and Private Howat would see rest from the Western Front for the rest of 1915 until 21 July 1916. For on that date they were ordered back to the front and attack *High Wood* the very next day.

High Wood is a wood near *Bazentin le Pett* in the Somme region of northern France which lay behind the German second line. The wood crowned a ridge which overlooked the ground for a considerable distance. On the night of 22 July 1916, the 51st Division attacked *High Wood* with two battalions of the 154th Brigade at 1:30 a.m. to capture the rest of the wood and 600 yards of the Switch Line.⁶ Private Howat was part of the first initial wave. There were many casualties to machine gun fire. The stench of rotting corpses in the wood was overwhelming and it inspired E.A. MacKintosh of the Seaforth Highlanders (51st Division) to pen the following:

“High Wood to Waterlot Farm

There is a wood at the top of a hill,
If it's not shifted its standing there still;
There is a farm a short distance away,
But I'd not advise you to go there by day,
For the snipers abound, and the shells are not rare,
And a man's only chance is to run like a hare,
So take my advice if you're chancing your arm
From High Wood to Waterlot Farm

High Wood to Waterlot Farm,
All on a summer's day,
Up you get to the top of the trench
Though you're sniped at all the way.
If you've got a smoke helmet there
You'd best put it on if you could,
For the wood down by Waterlot Farm
Is a bloody high wood.”

⁶ The other actions in the Spring of 1915. Assessed at www.1914-1918.net/bat 12.htm



Fig.2. Aerial Photograph, High Wood, Somme, 51st Highland Division co.uk

Intended to be a decisive breakthrough, the Battle of the Somme instead became a futile and indiscriminate slaughter of men. David W. Howat was one of the lucky ones to have survived.

A second attempt at taking *High Wood* on 30 July 1916 gained some ground but was forced back by a massive German bombardment and on 7 August 1916 the 51st Division was relieved with more than half of *High Wood* occupied by the 51st. Quoting from 'The History of the Fifty-first (Highland) Division 1914-1918' by Major F.W. Bewsher: "So ended the first offensive operations, in which the Division had been employed as a whole unit. The results had been disappointing and dispiriting to all. Over 3,500 casualties, including 150 officers, had been sustained. In two fruitless attempts to carry a German position which remained intact, in spite of many attacks by successive Divisions until 15 September. The Germans had shown that High Wood could not be taken hurriedly by a frontal attack...High Wood was finally overcome by a mine, which shattered the redoubt, and by tanks, which on this occasion were employed for the first time in the Great War."⁷

The Battle of the Ancre (Beaumont Hamel) 'The Spirit of the Troops is excellent'

The Battle of the Ancre was the final large British attack of the Battle of the Somme which occurred between 13-18 November 1916. This was an important offensive operation. A serious natural obstacle confronted the Highlanders in a deep fold of the ground known as Y Ravine, which ran down from the village to the German trenches, and the ground in general over which their advance was made was horrible with the dead and the litter of the struggle left here in the previous July.⁸ The 152nd in which Lance Corporal D.W. Howat served and 153rd Brigades led the attack, which quickly carried the front German lines and swept through the Y Ravine after a bitter bayonet conflict; and the whole Division now

⁷ MacKintosh, E.A. War, The Liberator and Other Pieces. London: The Bodley Head. 1918

⁸ 51st Highland Division. Assessed at 51hd.co.uk/history/battlesommehighwood

hurled into the assault, burst in upon the village with its sinister network of caverns and strong points with a Highland passion that was irresistible.⁹

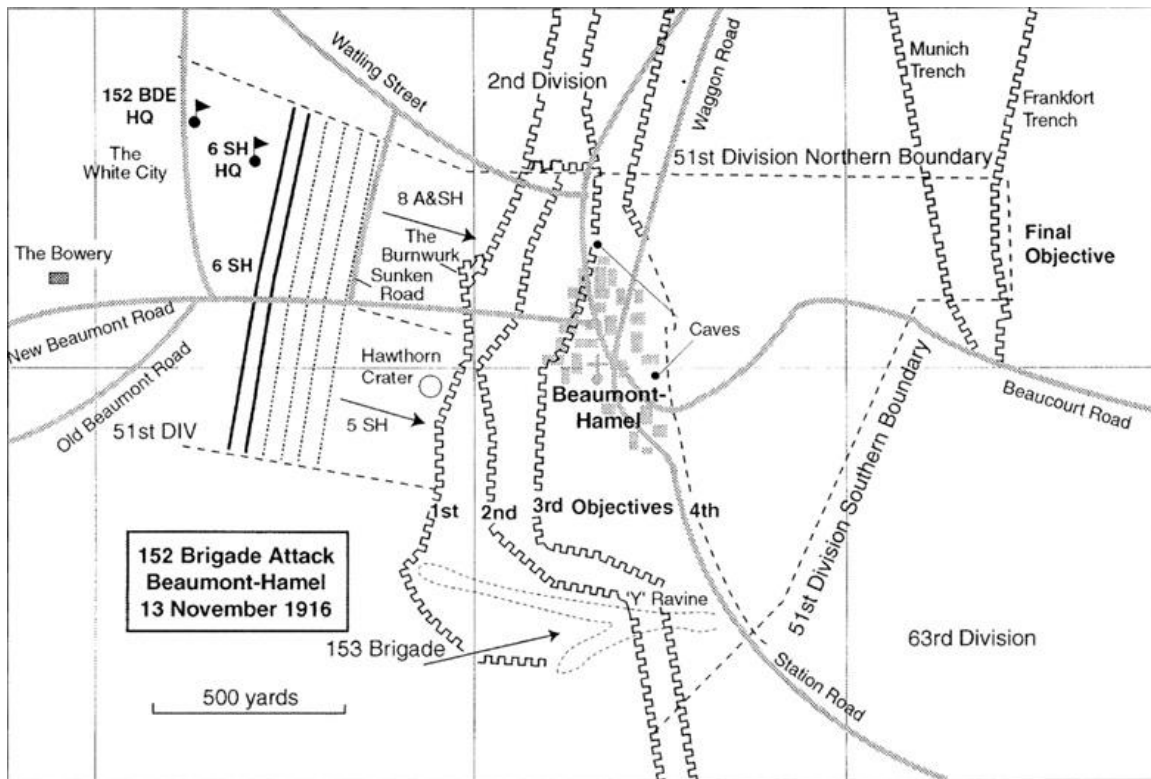


Fig.3. 152nd Brigade Attack Diagram, Beaumont Hamel, 13 November 1916

The following is an account taken from “The Spirit of the Troops is Excellent,” by Derek Bird: “With the 6th Seaforth forming the fifth and sixth waves of the attack they first had to move forward over the positions previously occupied by the forward battalions. This they did without any trouble, although at one stage they overtook part of one of the leading battalions and had to pause briefly to allow them to regain their position before carrying on across no man’s land. Most of the division’s Vickers machine guns were grouped at a point known as The Bowery and were firing a protective barrage onto the German rear positions, however, the attacking battalions had to be carefully briefed that due to the contours of the ground it would sound as if the bullets were only just passing over their heads, although in reality there would be a distance of ‘several feet...’ The advancing battalions were initially able to take advantage of pre-dawn darkness and the thick mist that obscured their movements from the Germans... Once the waves of 1/5th Seaforth and 1/8th Argylls had captured the German front line the 6th Seaforth [Lance Corporal David W. Howat] passed through them and pressed on to the second line. Here strong resistance was encountered and the men became scattered.”¹⁰

⁹ The 51st Highland Division. Assessed at net.lib.byu.edu/estu/ww1/memoir/docs/51st/51st1.htm

¹⁰ The 51st Highland Division. Assessed at net.lib.byu.edu/estu/ww1/memoir/docs/51st/51st1.htm



Fig.4. General View of Battlefield, Photograph Courtesy 51st Highland Division co.uk



Fig.5. Battle of Ancre, November 1916, Photograph Courtesy of 51st Highland Division co.uk

Lance Corporal David W. Howat survived the Battle of Ancre however 2,200 of his fellow soldiers did not.¹¹ This became the last notable Battle of the Somme.

¹¹ 51st Highland Division. Assessed at 51hd.co.uk/accounts/152 Brigade attack Beaumont Hamel

The Battle of Arras (Rolincourt)

Lance Corporal Howat and the Highlanders found themselves in the line near Arras, again at Rolincourt for intensive training for the April 1917 offensive on the enemy lines. The Battle of Arras commenced on 9 April 1917. The Highlanders were opposite *Thelus* and facing *Vimy Ridge*. A fierce enemy barrage precluded the attack: yet Gordons, Black Watch, Argylls, Seaforths, and Royal Scots swept through the first objective line of the German trenches as though they had been a triumphal arch.¹² Counter-attacking by the enemy followed.



Fig.6. Machine Gun Corps, Photograph Courtesy of Imperial War Museums (Q5172)

The Highlanders had three lines of objectives named Black line (first objective), Blue line (second objective) and the Brown line (final objective). With fierce enemy fire, they had to cross 12,500 yards. The following extract from "The Spirit of the troops is Excellent:" The battalion would advance in a series of double waves. Each double wave would combine when they reached the German lines... The 6th Seaforths rushed forward and took up firing positions on the edge of the trench. Initially they made no attempt to jump into the trenches because they had learnt that the Germans were likely to rush out of their dug-outs and start firing along the trench, which in the past had caused many casualties. By staying on the parapet the Highlanders were reasonably protected from any fire from the trench itself and they could shoot the enemy down as they emerged from their dug-out... Casualties were heavy and the battalion War Diary stated that 142 were killed, 176 wounded and 2 missing."¹³ Only on the 11th of April were the Highlanders able to achieve the breakthrough to the Brown line.

¹² Miles, W. *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1916: 2 July 1916 to the End of Battles of the Somme*. History of the Great War Based on Official Documents by Direction of the Historical Section of the Committee of the Imperial Defence 11 (1WM & Battery Press 1992 ed). London: HMSO

¹³ The 51st Highland Division. Assessed at net.lib.byu.edu/estu/ww1/memoir/docs/51st/51st1.htm



Fig.7. Ruins of Roclincourt, May 1917, Photograph Courtesy 51st Highland Division co.uk

Fampoux and Chemical Works

On 23 April 1917 the Highlanders were ordered to attack the enemy at Fampoux, Roeux and the Chemical Works. The German defenders had concentrated an unparalleled array of machine guns on these positions. With unabated passion the Highlanders, after a brief breathing-space behind the lines on the St. Pol-Arras road, came back on the 23rd, carried the Chemical Works and the Corona Trench beyond it with great dash, and fought bloodily for their retention during the whole day, though compelled at last to fall back upon a line a little to the east of their farthest advance.¹⁴ The most stubborn of Prussian troops were brought against the Fifty-first on the 23rd, how close and fierce was the fighting may be gathered from the fact that on the steps of Roeux Cemetery a Prussian and a sergeant of the Argylls were found gripped together in death, the Prussian with his teeth in the Highlanders wrist, the Highlander with his in the Prussian's throat. They had been killed by a shell.¹⁵

¹⁴ 51st Highland Division. Assessed at 51hd.co.uk/accounts/6thSeaforthRochincourt/Arras

¹⁵ The 51st Highland Division. Assessed at net.lib.byu.edu/estu/ww1/memoir/docs/51st/51st1.htm

Daily Life in the Trenches for Lance Corporal D.W. Howat

Whether in the front line, support or serve trenches soldiers like Lance Corporal D.W. Howat had a constant companion, death. Constant shellfire brought random death at any time. Soldiers were buried alive because of these large shell bursts. Enemy sniper bullets were a constant threat.

Disease also wrought a heavy toll on the soldiers. Rats by the millions infested the trenches. Lice, were a source of infection as well for the soldiers causing them to itch increasingly and louse borne Trench Fever was endemic in the trenches. The smell of rotting corpses and overflowing latrines would give an offensive stench as well. Overall this was not a pleasant place to be during the course of the war however the 51st Highlanders did their best to overcome the daily life in the trenches along the Western Front.

The Final Battle: Passchendaele

Lance Corporal D.W. Howat and the Highlanders by the end of May 1917 moved north to the Lys and participated in the Battle of Passchendaele or the Third Battle of Ypres which began on 31 July 1917. The Highlanders would play an important strategic role in the opening attack against the low Flanders ridges. The Germans on the other hand had prepared for the attack by constructing a large concentration of pill-box fortresses. The 51st Highlanders advanced and through their efforts put these pill-boxes out of action or circumventing them all together. This became known as Pilckem Ridge.

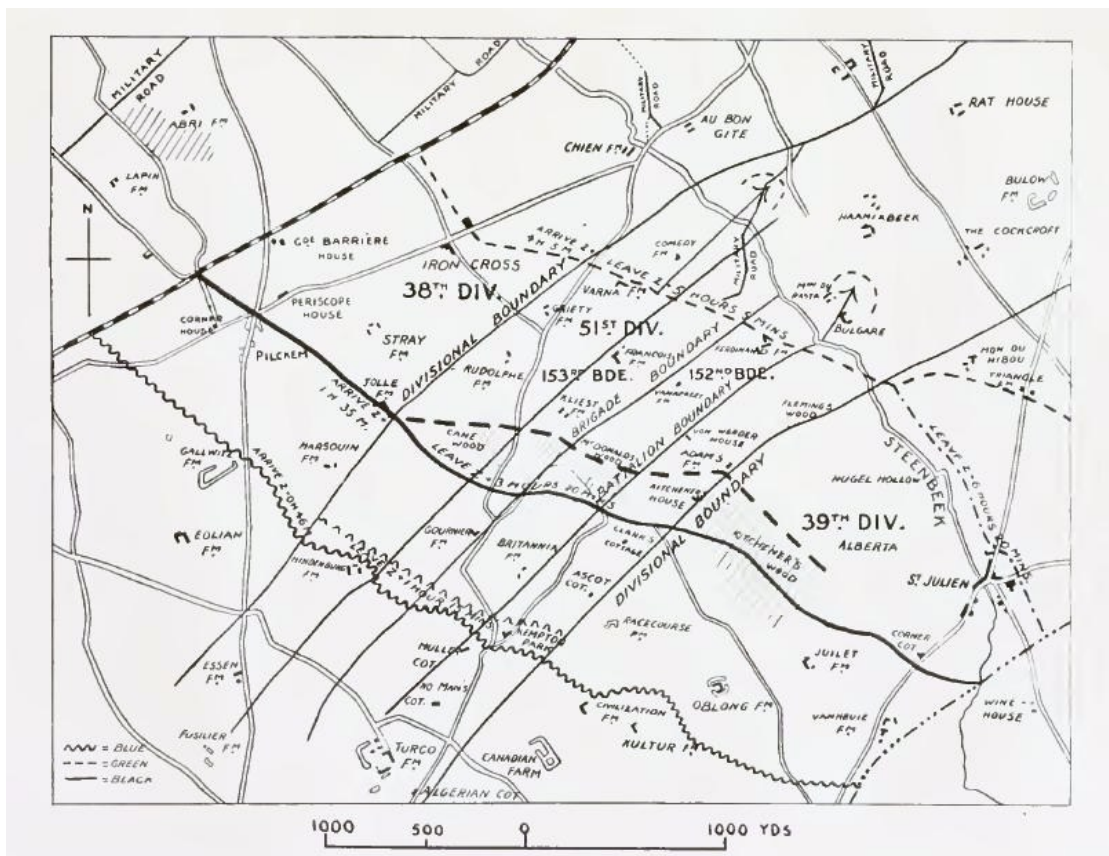


Fig.8. 51st Division, Battle of Pilckem Ridge, 31 July 1917 (From F.W. Bewsher "The History of the 41st Highland Division 1914-1918 (1921)

So far as the north of the Arras sector was concerned, that opening day of the Arras battle was a victory for the British Army.¹⁶ On 24 July 1917 Lance Corporal Howat made out his informal will given to soldiers before battle. He wrote: "In the event of my death I give the whole of my property and effects to my mother Mrs. K. Howat, Clifton House, Grantown-on-Spey. Signed Lance Corporal D. Howat."¹⁷

SC7018/634/8 (3)
18
WILL.

In the event of my death I give the whole of my property and effects to my mother Mrs K Howat Clifton House Grantown-on-Spey

Signature Lt Col D Howat
Rank and Regt. Lt Col 6th Seaforth
Date 24/7/17

Fig.9. Lance Corporal Howat Last Will, 24 July 1917 © Soldiers Wills, ScotlandsPeople.gov.uk

2 August 1917 would begin like any other day for Lance Corporal D.W. Howat while on the front. It is not known how exactly he became wounded on that day. No military records exist on his wounds. After receiving his battle wounds Lance Corporal D.W. Howat was taken to Casualty Clearing Station

¹⁶ The 51st Highland Division. Assessed at net.lib.byu.edu/estu/ww1/memoir/docs/51st/51st1.htm

¹⁷ Soldiers Wills, Lance Corporal David W. Howat, 24 July 1917, ScotlandsPeople.gov.uk

Number 32 in the rear.¹⁸ He would survive for only four days while there. David W. Howat died of his wounds received in action on 6 August 1917 at the age of 22.¹⁹



Fig.10. Lance Corporal David W. Howat, 6th Seaforth Highlanders

He was buried in the Brandhdek New Military Cemetery at Ieper, Belgium among his fellow comrades who fell at Passchendaele. His officers wrote in the highest terms of his sterling character.²⁰



Fig.11. Lance Corporal D.W. Howat Grave (middle) Photograph Courtesy of Commonwealth War Graves Commission

¹⁸ U.K. DeRuvigny's Roll of Honor 1914-1924. Ancestry.com. Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2009 p. 89

¹⁹ U.K. DeRuvigny's Roll of Honor 1914-1924. Ancestry.com. Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2009 p. 89

²⁰ U.K. DeRuvigny's Roll of Honor 1914-1924. Ancestry.com. Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2009 p. 89



Fig.12. Brandhoek New Military Cemetery, Ieper, Belgium, Photograph Courtesy of World War I Battlefields.co.uk

For his service Lance Corporal Howat received the Victory Medal and British War Medal.

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SEAFORTH HIGHLANDERS REGIMENT OR CORPS.

ROLL OF INDIVIDUALS entitled to the Victory Medal and the British War Medal granted under Army Orders 266 & 301 of 1919.

Regt. No.	Rank	NAME	Well previously served with Regt. No. and rank in which he served into the date of the	Theatres of war in which served								Shops awarded (to be left blank)	Record of disposal of decorations (a) Presented (b) Dispatched by Post (c) Taken into blank	REMARKS
				From	To	From	To	From	To	From	To			
265240	Pte.	BORRHNICK, Charles	5/Bn 265240 Pte.											
265241	"	DYCE, William	6/Bn 265241 Pte.											
265243	L/Cpl.	COUPTS, Bertie	6/Bn 265241											
265244	Pte.	HAIN, Alexander C.	" 265241											
265245	"	MORRISON, George	" 265241											
265246	"	RUSSELL, Alexander	" 265241											
265247	"	CRICKSHAW, Alex.R.	2/Bn 265246											
265248	Cpl.	WINE, Andrew	6/Bn 265247											
265249	Pte.	JACOBSON, Peter	" 265249 Pte.											
265250	L/Cpl.	STUART, John	" 265250											
265251	Pte.	HUTCH, Alexander	" 265251											
265254	"	HOWAT, David W.	" 265254											
265256	CQMS.	ASHER, John A.G.	" 265256 Cr.Sgt.											
265260	Pte.	SIMPSON, William	" 265260 Pte.											
265261	A/Cpl.	ROBERTSON, Sweno	" 265261											
265266	Pte.	MCIVER, John	" 265266											
265268	"	MYERS, Jacob Leese	5/Bn 265268											
265269	"	MORAE, John	6/Bn 265269											

I certify that according to the Official Records the individuals named in this ROLL are entitled to the Medal or Medals as detailed above.

Place PERTH.
Date 14th. February. 1921.

Officer in Charge of Records. Signature and rank of Officer certifying.

Fig.13. U.K., World War I Service Medal and Award Rolls, 1914-1920 (David W. Howat, Line 12) © Ancestry.com

Lance Corporal D.W. Howat and all of his fellow Highlanders gave the ultimate sacrifice for freedom. They answered the call of duty in that long ago war, the war to end all wars. In this the centenary year of World War I let us all remember them and their sacrifice. On 21 September 1914 there appeared in the *Times Newspaper* a short poem written by Robert Laurence Binyon entitled "For the Fallen." These moving words are still read at services of commemoration all over the world when the dead of this and later conflicts are remembered. "They shall grow not old, as we that are left to grow old; Age shall not weary them, nor, the years condemn. At the going down of the sun and in the morning, We shall remember them."

In grateful esteem and recognition by his distant fourth cousin, Michael T. Tracy.

Memoratus in aeternum (Forever Remembered)

Acknowledgements

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