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## William Nimmo, the Joiner from Dunbar whose Trade saved him from the Somme

by [RUTHF](#) on 15/05/2015 · [LEAVE A COMMENT](#) · in [UNCATEGORIZED](#)

One of the most enjoyable things about working in the Archive and Local History Centre here at the John Gray Centre is finding out the personal stories behind the collections. We were contacted recently by Sandy Nimmo who was born and brought up in Dunbar. Would we be interested in his father William (Willie) Nimmo's diary and papers from World War One? I'm not really sure you'll want the diary, wrote Sandy, it's in very poor condition and difficult to read. Don't worry about that, we wrote back, it sounds like exactly the sort of thing we collect. And so with thanks to Sandy and his sister Jean I am able to share with you the story of William Nimmo who left Church Street Dunbar in 1914 to enlist in the 16<sup>th</sup> Highland Light Infantry (HLI).



A joiner to trade – he had served his apprenticeship with McCarthur's in East Linton – William Nimmo enlisted on the 7<sup>th</sup> October 1914. His Soldier's Book shows that he was age 23 years and 6 months and joined up in Glasgow. The 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the HLI was formed on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1914 by the City's Lord Provost. It was known as the Glasgow Boys Brigade Battalion since so many of its recruits came from the Boys Brigade. The men were sent initially to Gailes Camp in Ayrshire where they did their basic training before heading south to camps in England. In 1915 the Battalion eventually sailed for France landing at Boulogne on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1915. According to his family William talked very little about life in the trenches as he lost so many friends and witnessed so many awful things.



William was a keen sportsman. Here he is (No. 125, middle row) in the 16th Battalion Athletics team at Gales Camp, Ayrshire.

Just days before the Battle of the Somme in 1916 there was a desperate need for wheelwrights and Willie volunteered his services as a joiner and was whisked away to mend wheels for the artillery. He always said that his trade saved his life since very few of his Battalion survived the Somme. Soon afterwards he was posted to join the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion HLI fighting at the time in Mesopotamia.



This is the 16th Battalion dressed in winter kit, France c1916. William is on the far left of the front row. Note Nifty the cat, the Battalion mascot, on the knee of the soldier next to William.

At the beginning of 1917 the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was helping to defend Baghdad against a Turkish invasion. After capturing Baghdad in March British and Russian forces closed in on the Turkish Army throughout 1917 and the Spring of 1918. In his diary William describes the Turkish soldiers as 'poor looking souls'. Like Gallipoli conditions in Mesopotamia were appalling and there were high casualties from disease alone. However the diary reveals that the soldiers also had some good times. William's company sailed from Devonport on the 'Tahiti' in March 1917 bound for Freetown West Africa, then Cape Town and from Cape Town the ship sailed to Durban, South Africa. The troops spent a month in Durban before travelling on to Bombay and eventually Basra and William wrote "had a great time while we were in Durban".



Included among the papers are copies of 'The Somewhere Bulletin' which was printed aboard the Caronia – or 'the good ship Carissima' as she appears in the Bulletin. This spoof newspaper reveals something of the stopover in Durban, included are sports roundups, anecdotes and adverts for the 'Fern Villa Hotel', the finest "Dug-Out" in Durban where cocktails are mixed by the 'Durban Sunrise Cocktail King'.

Towards the end of the war, when most soldiers were looking forward to being demobilised and sent home to their families, William was among those sent from the Middle East to the North West frontier of India to help quell the Afghan uprising so he was not demobbed until 1919. He married in Glasgow on boxing day that year and continued to live and work in Glasgow until he was offered a job with McCarthur's in East Linton and was able to return to Dunbar where he lived until he died in 1985 at the age of 94.

Thanks to William's son Sandy his army papers and photographs make a fantastic addition to our archive collections. If you would like to find out more or have something you thing we might be interested in please do get in touch, email [history@eastlothian.gov.uk](mailto:history@eastlothian.gov.uk) or visit us on the first floor of the John Gray Centre.

Ruth

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