

Engraved spoon helps identify WW1 casualty

Two British soldiers killed on 26 September 1915 (during the Battle of Loos) were laid to rest with full military honours earlier today (Thursday 5 May), a century after their deaths. The service was organised by the MOD's Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (MOD JCCC), also known as the "MOD War Detectives", and was held at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's (CWGC) Loos British Cemetery, Loos-en-Gohelle in northern France.

Members of the Royal Regiment of Scotland carry Pte Johnston to his final resting place. Crown copyright.

One set of remains was recovered in January 2018 during a WW1 ordnance search near Lens. Also found was a pocket watch and a spoon with the number 13228 stamped on the back. MOD JCCC and the CWGC confirmed it to be the regimental number of Private (Pte) William Johnston (aged 39) of 7th battalion, Royal Scots Fusiliers, having cross referenced it with war records that also confirmed he was the only casualty with this number who did not have a known burial place.

Soldiers of the Yorkshire Regiment carry an unknown East Yorkshire Regiment soldier to his final resting place. Crown copyright.

The MOD JCCC traced a great-great-niece who provided a DNA sample to compare with DNA taken from the remains. The results were conclusive. Pte Johnston's service records no longer exist, so not much personal information is known about him.

Sharon Williamson, of Portadown, County Armagh, is Pte Johnston's great-great-niece and DNA donor, she said:

"I was sent an email by a relative in America who had been contacted by the MOD War Detectives to say that they had found remains from the Great War. They asked for my DNA, that was the start of our journey. Later, once it was confirmed that William was our relative, we couldn't miss the opportunity to be here and pay our respects to a family member that, though we didn't know, we did not want him to be alone on his final journey."

Phil Aldridge, great great nephew of Pte Johnston lays a wreath. Crown copyright.

The remains of another British soldier were found separately in the same area. Although it was not possible to identify him by name, MOD JCCC did

confirm he served with the East Yorkshire Regiment due to two East Yorkshire shoulder titles being found with the remains.

Louise Dorr, MOD JCCC Caseworker said:

"I'm both pleased and saddened that although I have been able to identify one of these soldiers by name, there are just too many casualties missing from the 8th East Yorkshire Regiment for us to be able to name their casualty.

"I'm delighted to see them both laid to rest in front of their military family and, in Pte Johnston's case, his biological family. May they both rest in peace."

The service was conducted by the Reverend Dave Jeal, Chaplain to 2nd Battalion, Royal Regiment of Scotland. Two bearer parties were provided by the Yorkshire Regiment and the Royal Regiment of Scotland respectively.

Rev Dave Jeal leads the service. Crown copyright.

Rev Dave Jeal, who's own grandfather Frederick Nichols served with the East Yorkshire Regiment during the Second World War, said:

"To be involved today is a real privilege for me. When these two men died they did so in the service of our country: they gave everything. That's so important to remember and to honour, because by bearing their remains to their final rest, our young soldiers of today can see they walk in the footsteps of those giants who went before them."

The graves will now be marked by headstones provided by the CWGC, who will care for their final resting place in perpetuity.

CWGC Horticulture Manager, Steve Arnold said:

"As the Recovery Officer I was honoured to be able to retrieve these two British soldiers from where they had fallen over 100 years ago, together with the personal items that have enabled Private Johnston to be named. It is deeply moving to see them laid to rest today alongside their comrades; each time we engrave a new headstone we renew our commitment to caring for all the graves in our care in perpetuity."