

ON THE BRINK

The Politics of Conflict 1914-1916 Project

ACTIVE SERVICE

TOM MCKINNEY

Tom McKinney was born in 1893. He attended the Royal Belfast Academical Institution and Ballyhaise Agricultural College, where he prepared to take over his farming inheritance at Sentry Hill, Carnmoney. Sadly, this never came to pass. He died in July 1916 at the Somme. On 8th September 1914, Tom enlisted in the Public Schools and University Men's Force, which he was eligible to join due to his time at 'Inst'.

Tom was placed in the 20th Battalion Royal Fusiliers, who were sent to Surrey for training. From this time onwards, Tom frequently corresponded with his beloved family at Sentry Hill. By 21st November 1915, Tom had arrived at the Somme and had his first experience of trench life. However, it was not until February 1916, that he gave any indication of the dangers he faced at the Front. His letter on the 18th noted that he had had a near shave, sustaining a scalp wound, for which he was medically treated. Later, as a war trophy, Tom sent home the soft cap he was wearing during this incident. Censorship at the Front limited the details soldiers could share with those at home, but on the 4th April, Tom did offer insight into his soldiering duties:

'we snippers generally shoot at Germans but it requires a lot of patience and continual watching through a loophole before one is likely to see a Boche – when there is no prospect of seeing a German, we shoot at their periscopes.'



Photograph taken in the garden at Sentry Hill which includes Tom, in uniform, standing with his only sibling, sister Elsie. Seated in the middle is John McKinney, Tom's father, flanked by Tom's aunts, Janet (on right) and Meg (on left).
Sentry Hill Collection

During the 'Big Push' of 1st July, Tom's battalion was ordered to occupy key British fortifications in the Givenchy area and to support the 1st Battalion of the Cameronian Regiment, who led the attack in this sector. The latter were mown down by enemy fire that day. On 2nd July, surviving Scottish troops were withdrawn and were replaced by men from Tom's battalion. They remained there until 8 July. On 3rd July, Tom became a casualty of German shelling. He sustained a shrapnel wound to the thigh and was evacuated to receive medical attention. Tom's family were notified by telegram on 6th July. A few days later, they received a letter from Tom's friends advising them that his injuries were
'Not at all considered dangerous.'

On 7th July, Tom was admitted to the military hospital at St. Omer's. From there, a Sister Dempster regularly wrote to his family with updates. Within a week, his condition gradually became more critical. Despite the best efforts of medical staff, a bacterial infection, 'gas gangrene', had set in and caused his wound to rot. Tom died at 7.30pm on 19th July 1916. Being a well-connected family, the McKinneys received many letters expressing sympathy and offering consolation. His family was overcome with grief, particularly his grandfather William Fee McKinney, who died the following year.