

Sacrifice of Edinburgh battalions remembered at services in city and Contalmaison



The sacrifice of two Edinburgh battalions which were among the hardest hit at the start of the Battle of the Somme will be remembered at two special services, one in the city and one in France, on Friday.

It will be one hundred years since the 15th and 16th Royal Scots, went into action on July 1st 1916.

The 16th was famously called 'McCrae's battalion' after the charismatic Lieutenant-Colonel Sir George McCrae, who rallied the men of the Edinburgh to enlist beside him. During their advance on German defensive positions on the opening day of the Somme they lost more than three quarters of their strength. Those who survived regrouped at the French village of Contalmaison, where a Scottish cairn was erected in 2004. A memorial service will take place there on Friday morning at 09.15 French time.

Highlights of that event will be relayed to the civic event at St Cuthbert's Church that afternoon.

The St Cuthbert's service is being organised by the McCrae's Battalion Trust and will be led by Army Padres. McCrae's Battalion is also known as the Sporting Battalion after a group of Heart of Midlothian players along with professionals from other clubs including Hibernian, Raith Rovers, Falkirk and Dunfermline and their supporters.

One of the organisers of the service is Janice Todd, an elder at St Cuthbert's church and who's uncle Jimmy Todd was one of the players who signed up. The Raith Rovers player was the first footballer in the battalion to be killed, falling in action before the Somme. She said "I think this event is important because in a few years the immediate family members of the men who served and made the supreme sacrifice won't be here to remember them and WW1 will, inevitably, be relegated to the history books. We, in St Cuthbert's Church and McCrae's Battalion Trust, want people to know about this unique service so that they can come along and remember the fallen with us."

The Battle of the Somme saw 20,000 killed and 40,000 wounded in the space of an hour on the first morning. The toll included 500 from Edinburgh, the Lothians and Fife who were killed and up to 800 wounded. Author Jack Alexander instigated the building of the cairn at Contalmaison, and wrote official history of the battalion. He said: "The Somme is particularly poignant because so many of the lads who went over the top were civilian volunteers. We made a covenant with them that they would enlist and defeat the German Kaiser, but so many of them died trying to do that. Many of them were very young. We have a responsibility never to forget them. In my youth I used to know and chat to veterans of the First World War. Now when I speak to people who have served in Afghanistan it's the same stories the old boys told me. The Somme is as relevant today as it was 100 years ago."

The service in Edinburgh is a civic event which will be attended by dignitaries including representatives from Heart of Midlothian FC, Hibernian FC, Falkirk FC, Dunfermline Athletic FC and Raith Rovers FC. The service will be led by Rev Cole Maynard, Deputy Assistant Chaplain General, HQ 51st Infantry Brigade, who is from the Scottish Episcopal Church.

The Chair of McCrae's Battalion Trust, Major Gary Tait will be attending the Contalmaison service on Friday. Around 250 pilgrims and associates of the Trust are making the journey to

France. Up to 1,000 people are expected to attend the service at the Scottish cairn, which will be covered by BBC, STV, Forces TV, and French TV.