



THE COLLECTION

A Good Courage

A Black Watch private's 1915 New Testament, and the line printed above his name.

CHRIS VALLETTA

New Testament of Pvt. James Marshall
The Black Watch, 1915

THIS ONE CAME FROM AN AUCTION, and it belonged to a Scot.

It is a small New Testament with a worn tan cover and a cross stamped on the front. Inside, under a little printed Union Jack, the National Bible Society of Scotland put one line from Joshua: “Be strong and of a good courage, for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.” Beneath it, a soldier signed his name in ink. James Marshall. Black Watch. Below that, in print: On Active Service, 1915.

The Society made a promise during that war. Any Scottish soldier who asked for a New Testament would get one. They put copies beside hospital beds too, because wounded men had usually lost everything they carried.

James Marshall asked for his.

For a while his name was all I had. It is a common name in Scotland, and the Black Watch had more than one James Marshall. Then the regiment’s own roll of honour gave me the rest. Private James Marshall, service number S/9218, 9th Battalion, The Black Watch. Died April 30, 1916.

The Black Watch is one of Scotland’s oldest regiments. It began in 1725, when the Crown raised companies of Highlanders to police the Highlands.

The Gaelic name was Am Freiceadan Dubh, the Black Watch, and it may have come from the dark tartan they wore. Nearly two hundred years later, its men were still going to war in the kilt. By one account, the Germans called the kilted Highlanders “the ladies from hell.”

The 9th Battalion was made up of wartime volunteers. Their kilts reached them on January 20, 1915, while they were still in training. That autumn, at Loos, the battalion lost more than five hundred men. By spring it had been rebuilt and was back in the line near a village called Hulluch. Before the war ended, the 9th alone would lose 46 officers and 645 men killed.

On April 27, 1916, the Germans released gas there. Over three days the British lost nearly two thousand men, more than twelve hundred of them to gas.



James Marshall, Black Watch. On Active Service, 1915.

Three days later, James Marshall died in Bethune, a town behind the lines where the wounded were taken. Three other men of the 9th Battalion died that same day. Two of them are buried in the same cemetery he is. No record I can find says what killed him. I know where his battalion was, what came across those trenches, and where they carried the men who breathed it.

He lies in grave III. H. 86, Bethune Town Cemetery, France.

I keep coming back to the line printed above his name. Those words go back further than Joshua. Moses spoke them to the people he had led for forty years, and then to Joshua, on the day he handed him the job.

“So be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid and do not panic before them. For the LORD your God will personally go ahead of you. He will neither fail you nor abandon you.”

DEUTERONOMY 31:6 (NLT)

A leader cannot order courage. You cannot command a man to be brave in a gas cloud. What a leader can do is hand it to him. Go ahead of him. Stand beside him. Put something in his pocket that tells him he is not alone.

Somebody did that for James Marshall. People he never met printed a promise and made sure a soldier from Scotland could carry it into France. They never knew his name. They served him anyway.

That is the job. Leadership is service, and much of service is making sure the people you send carry a courage that is not theirs alone.

James Marshall signed his name under that promise and went where he was sent. A hundred and ten years later, the promise is still in his book.

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