

2019 Premier's Anzac Spirit School Prize

Frank Spencer Charles Day *By Matilda Cotton*



The third battle of Morlancourt, northwest of Amiens in Franceⁱ, occurred on 10th June 1918ⁱⁱ, shortly after Germany's Spring Offensive in what would be the closing year of the Great War had stalledⁱⁱⁱ. After the Russians and Germans signed an armistice, Germany had many soldiers ready for relocation from the Eastern Front in Russia to the Western Front, their last big push before more than 2 million Americans were set to arrive and fight with the Allies^{iv}. By this stage of the war, Australia had lost nearly 60,000 killed and nearly three times that wounded, and recruitment was drying up as the slaughter of a generation had severely depleted recruitment numbers, and an appetite for conscription was still not popular enough in a referendum to force more young Australians to be sent to reinforce them^v. The situation was dire for both the Allied and Axis powers. Everybody, except perhaps the generals were growing weary of the war.

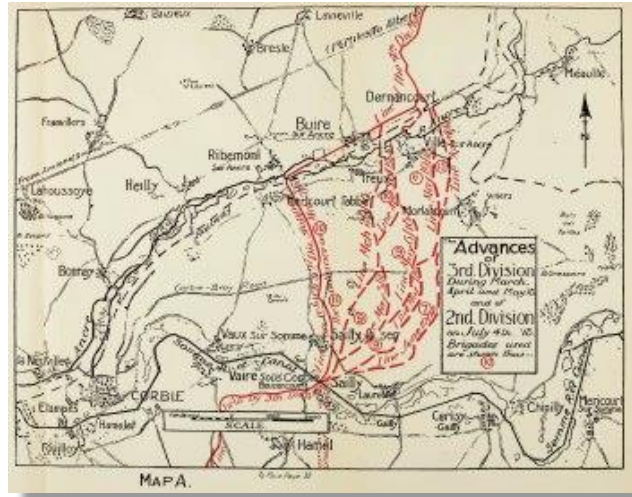


Figure 1: Map of Morlancourt



Figure 2: Lieutenant General John Monash

There was a push from Australian forces and the government to fight under their own leadership instead of British command; largely generals with scant attention to detail or regard for human life. By June 1918, command of Australian forces was given to Lieutenant General John Monash^{vi}, who had made a name for himself on Gallipoli and in France as a meticulous planner and successful leader. Monash was an Australian Reservist before the war, with a background as an engineer. His talents as a strategist and planner would become invaluable for what lay ahead^{vii}. Monash would be in charge of the Third Battle of Morlancourt, which would be used as a prelude to the famous battle of Hamel less than a month later, in which his planning would be acknowledged as the most meticulous of the war, and result in a spectacular victory for the Allies.

History has largely relegated this third battle of Morlancourt to a seemingly insignificant, largely overshadowed battle, yet for one young Australian infantry soldier who fought in the 27th battalion, it became a transformational event in his life.

Frank Spencer Charles Day, born 1894 in Mallala South Australia^{viii}, was a typical country lad. His parents Helen Maud Strongman and Charles Richard Day^{ix}, tried as best as they could to support Frank, but with 5 children^x, they found this a hard task. When Frank was just 17 years of age, the family moved to Nangari, near Loxton SA, in search of work. Frank found work as a Farm Labourer^{xi}, in the hopes he could help to support his family as best he could. Here, he learned how to tend to horses, and how to shoot rabbits for the family to later eat. He was an avid member of the Loxton Rifle Club^{xii}, and the local Congregational Church^{xiii}, as well as a champion South Australian Sprinter^{xiv}. He gave back to his community and worked hard to make an honest living in order to



Figure 3: HMAT Ballarat (A70)

support his family as best as he could. In April 1916, Frank decided to serve his country, and joined the Army^{xv}. On the 12th of June 1916, Frank, along with hundreds of others, boarded the HMAT Ballarat (A70)^{xvi}, and set sail for Plymouth, England as one of the 14th round of reinforcements for the 27th battalion.

Trenches along the Western Front were cramped and muddy, with overflowing toilets and rats throughout^{xvii}. The stench would have been unimaginable and living conditions sub-human, so Frank, like many, did not have a good run in the first few months of his service. After marching

into Rolleston on the 30th September 1916^{xviii}, Frank fell sick with bronchial catarrh. After 4 days in hospital in England^{xix}, Frank was released fit for duty, marching into Etaples on the 29th December 1916^{xx}. Frank re-joined his unit on the 18th Feb 1917^{xxi}. Soon after moving forward he fell sick again, and was treated by the 6th field ambulance on the 10th of March 1917, returning to duty on the 28th of March^{xxii}. The first major battle Frank participated in was as part of the first wave of the battle of Menin Road^{xxiii}. From there he participated in two more battles; the capture of Broodseinde ridge, and the turning back of the German's spring offense in April 1918^{xxiv}. Through this period, when not in battle the different battalions often participated in running races to pass the time. It didn't take long for Frank to prove himself as one of the fastest runners in the 27th battalion, and one of the fastest in the AIF^{xxv}. This battalion was also nearby at the time the Red Baron was shot down, and Frank always swore that it was in fact him who shot down this infamous German Fighter.^{xxvi}



Figure 4: Soldiers from the 27th Battalion marching through Somme, France, 7th April 1918



Figure 5: The starting places of battalions in the battle of Morlancourt

The third battle of Morlancourt was to be completed at night to aid in the troop's concealment and surprise on the enemy^{xxvii}. This meant that Frank needed to creep silently to his position, along with other 2nd brigade soldiers the night before the attack and remain concealed through the next day. This was no easy feat, but with an Australian general in command, Frank and the rest of his comrades had renewed vigour and faith.

At exactly 9:45pm^{xxviii}, Australian artillery began to fire, backed up by medium and light trench mortar batteries; the moment the infantry had been anticipating. Attacking troops, Frank included, moved to within 70 metres of the barrage^{xxix}. Then, they fought in earnest, getting in to the trenches and amongst the Germans with rifles, bayonets and bombs.

Then, a gunshot... And a scream. Frank had been hit, and fallen head first into a shell hole^{xxx}. The pain would have been unimaginable. A bullet had smashed his left thigh, and fractured

his femur^{xxxii}, and Frank soon lost consciousness from blood loss. When the stretcher bearers came around to look for casualties, Frank appeared to be dead, and so was left behind^{xxxiii}. On a subsequent sortie a day later however, the stretcher bearers discovered that Frank was indeed alive, and he was stretchered to the 20th Casualty Clearing station^{xxxiv}. However, being as gravely injured as he was, Frank was transferred many times, finally ending up at the second Auxiliary Hospital in Southall. He was eventually discharged on furlough^{xxxv} but returned to have his leg amputated on the 17th of August 1918^{xxxvi}, after an accident occurred in the hospital involving boiling water^{xxxvii}. Through all this Frank kept his head held high, retaining his good humour and larrikin streak, even though it meant the end of his promising running career.

During the battle of Morlancourt, Australia lost 400 men; 86 of them either wounded or killed from the 27th battalion^{xxxviii}. There was no compensation for these losses, but we can say one thing; they will always be remembered by a grateful country, and in the hearts of the families they left behind. Whilst Frank was one of the lucky ones, this war forever changed him, and the battle for him was never forgotten.

During his recuperation in England, Frank stayed at the Overseas Club^{xxxix}. After going through the trauma of his major leg injury that was not healing well, Frank needed someone's support. With his family still back in Australia, he found solace with a nurse, Sadie Harte. Sadie helped Frank through this tough time. After spending a year together, Frank proposed, and the couple were married in a beautiful wedding in the Church of the Sacred Heart, Edinburgh, on the 10th April 1919^{xl}. From there the couple boarded the SS 'Bremen' and returned to Australia^{xli}. Frank was discharged on the 6 February 1920, after being pronounced medically unfit^{xlii}. He was awarded the British War Medal^{xliii}, and the Victory Medal^{xliiii} for his service in the war.



Figure 6: British War Medal

Together, the couple had two children and settled at Balaklava, Frank a teacher at Pinkerton Plains, and Sadie a housewife. Through Frank's job, the couple moved around South Australia a lot, spending time at Reeves Plains (1931 – 1933) and Avon (1939 – 1946)^{xliiv}. Frank always retained his good nature and never let losing his leg be a setback. In fact, at a school picnic Frank ran a race, using crutches because he never liked to wear a prosthetic leg^{xliiv}, against a boy without anyone else to run against^{xliiv}.

END NOTES

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Opening Image: Virtual War Memorial | Frank Spencer Charles DAY. 2019. Virtual War Memorial | Frank Spencer Charles DAY. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/145113>. [Accessed 13 May 2019].

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Figure 6: British War Medal 1914-1920 : World War One : Department of Defence. 2019. British War Medal 1914-20 : World War One : Department of Defence. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.defence.gov.au/Medals/Imperial/WWI/British-War-Medal-1914-20.asp>. [Accessed 13 May 2019].