

Temporary Sergeant George Henry Young

Rod Martin

George Young was three months short of his twenty-fourth birthday when he enlisted in Melbourne on 22 August 1914 and was assigned to 5 Infantry Battalion. A cabinet maker by trade, George was a fit young man, standing 182 centimetres tall and weighing approximately seventy kilos. In joining up so soon after the declaration of war in the first week of that month, George became one of the so-called “Dinkum Aussies”, the first group to fight for their recently independent nation.

George, who had military experience in the form of one year’s involvement in senior cadets, was trained at Broadmeadows and Williamstown before sailing from Port Melbourne on A3 HMAT *Orvieto* on 21 October 1914.



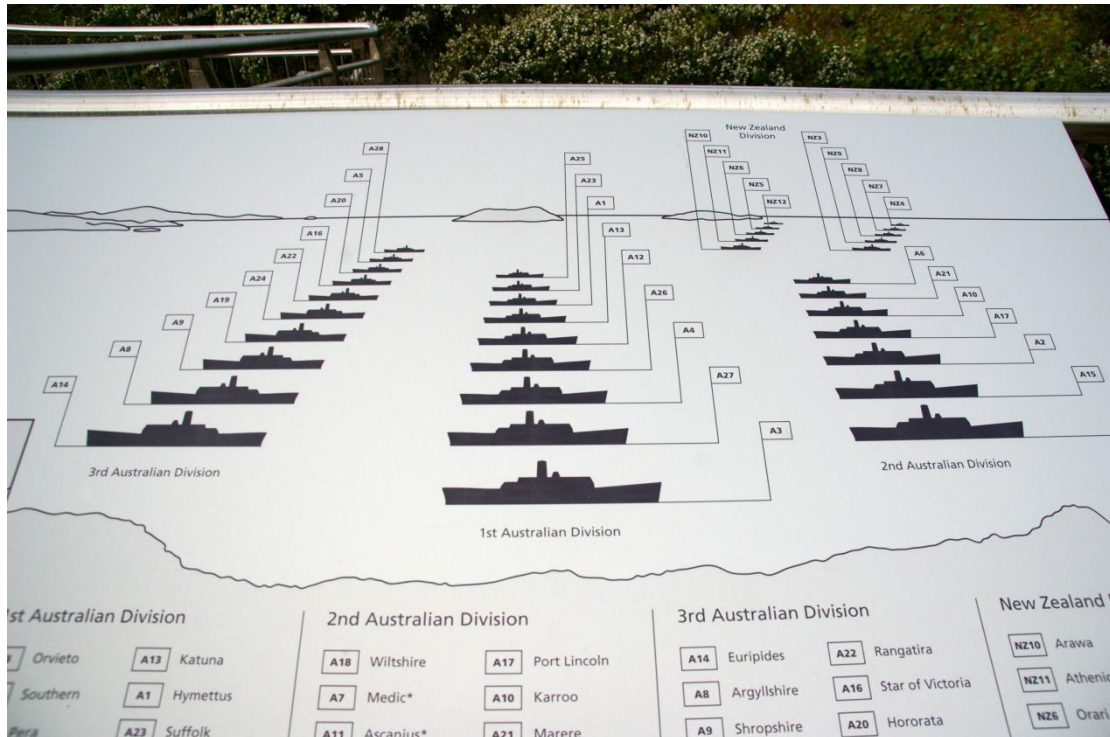
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

C01686

HMAT *Orvieto* at Port Said, Egypt, December 1914

(AWM C01686)

The ship headed for the port of Albany in Western Australia, there to become a member of a large convoy that was gathering in King George Sound. The convoy sailed on 1 November, ostensibly for the recently created Western Front in France and southern Belgium. On 9 November, while on the way to Colombo in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), the convoy was about fifty miles off the Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean. Word came though that the German raider *Emden* was in the vicinity of the islands and posing a threat to allied shipping. HMAS *Sydney*(1) detached itself from the convoy and headed for the islands. It bombarded the *Emden* so fiercely that her German captain was forced to beach his ship on the coast of North Cocos Island.



The layout of the convoy in King George Sound, Albany, October 1914. A3 HMAT *Orvieta*, was at the head of the 1 Australian Division contingent. (Rod Martin)

While the ships were in transit, the British government decided to adopt a proposal by First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill to move to knock recently declared German ally Turkey out of the war. The idea was to use warships to attack the Turkish forts guarding the Dardanelles Straits and thus gain access to Constantinople. As a backstop to this strategy, if it failed, a landward invasion was planned, troops landing on the Gallipoli Peninsula and then crossing to the area around the straits and knocking out the forts that way. It was decided that the Australian and New Zealand troops heading to the Middle East would be kept there and form part of such an invading force.

The convoy first stopped at Port Said in Egypt on 1 December, and then moved on to Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast, arriving on 4-5 December. Most of the men of 5 Battalion were then taken by train to Cairo, and then marching to a specially constructed camp at Mena, about sixteen kilometres from the centre of Cairo, and close to the Pyramids. Training began on 10 December. Most of the men finally left Mena on 4 April, headed for Alexandria. Two days earlier, however, while they were still at Mena, many of the men were involved in a riot in Haret al Wassir, the "red light" district of Cairo. Up to 2 500 Australians and New Zealanders descended on the district, incensed by the incidence of venereal disease in the brothels there and the poor quality and high price of the alcohol dispensed in the hotels. There was a lot of looting, burning and assaulting before mounted police arrived to disperse the crowd and arrest a number of intoxicated soldiers. One Australian soldier described it as "The greatest bit of fun since we have been in Egypt . . ." When the troops left Mena a couple of days later, many were sporting "war wounds" and/or hangovers. Whether George had been involved in the riot we do not know. Suffice it to say that he was not kept back in Cairo suffering from venereal disease. Quite a few men were.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

PS1373

Damage in the Wassir district after the riot of 2 April 1915

(AWM PS1373)

The misbehaviour by troops in Cairo caused the military authorities to seek out a new campsite, far from areas such as the Wassir. They settled on a place called Tel el Kebir, quite a distance south of the city.

The naval assault on the Dardanelles having failed, the move was made towards a land invasion. When the troops left Alexandria on 5 April, they were headed for the Greek island of Mudros, there to undergo further training, especially in the art of landing a whaleboat on a shore. Unfortunately, the war records for 5 Battalion and 2 Brigade (to which it belonged) are not available for the remainder of April, so the period leading up to and including the Anzac landing on the twenty-fifth of that month is not recorded. However, in describing 2 Brigade's role in the attack, Les Carlyon tells us that it was part of the main body of men - 8000 in all - that would approach the shore at a spot just north of a headland called Gaba Tepe around 5.00 am, land and take the beach. 2 Brigade would then move north and take a hill given the title of 971, and guard the beach north as far as a point called Fisherman's Hut.

That was the plan, anyway. The reality was that the currents along that stretch of coast were much stronger than anticipated, and moving in a northerly direction. The boats became bunched together and gathered in confusion off a narrow sandy beach, backed by towering cliffs. The men were ordered to get out of the boats quickly (some never made it even that far, being wounded or killed in the boats by Turkish bullets and shrapnel - see my story about Private Ellis Stones). Those who did make it on to the beach were ordered to drop their packs and head up the steep and gorse-covered slopes as fast as they could. The irony of the event is that some of them made it to the

tops of the hills that day, getting further inland than they did during the next eight months.

Once the chaotic situation during the landing had abated, and the survivors of the various units had been gathered together, the task became one of reinforcing the hilltop posts and establishing a headquarters on the narrow beach.



Anzac Cove today

(Robert Cathie)

Just what part George Young played in these proceedings is unknown. However, we do know that he made it on to the beach successfully, but what happened to him after that is difficult to determine. He may have been wounded in the foot soon after landing, or wounded very shortly after 2 Brigade was sent to the right of the beach and on to what was labelled 400 Plateau, in the middle of which was a spot which would become later known as Lone Pine. Either way, his military record tells us that, by 4 May, he was in a convalescent hospital on the island of Malta. He spent some time there on the island before being transferred to 3 London General Hospital, being admitted on 11 September that year.

Just how long George spent in the hospital and in London is also difficult to determine. His record reveals a substantial space of time that is simply not accounted for. After the admission to the hospital, the next entry comes in June 1916, more than nine months later. On 14 June that year, he was reported as being absent without leave and only reappeared or was apprehended on the twenty-first of that month (for which he lost eight days' pay and suffered 168 hours of detention). Given the detail that is provided later in his record, particularly the note telling us that he married a London girl named Annie Jones on 30 May, it is not hard to imagine that he wanted to spend some quality time with his new bride before he had to return to duty - which he did on 28 June, being transported to Perham Downs in Wiltshire, presumably for retraining.

One interesting item on his marriage certificate was the statement that his occupation was as a stockbroker! That's quite a substantial upward move from cabinet maker, the occupation stated on his attestation form in 1914. One wonders if George inflated his occupation to impress his bride and his prospective parents-in-law.

On 3 August 1916, George rejoined 5 Battalion in France. At that time, it was located in reserve at Bonneville, north of the Somme. On 25 July, the battalion, along with the rest of 2 Division, had taken over the front line trenches at Pozières from 1 Division. The attack was designed to take the ruined town, located on a ridge, and then the highest point on the ridge, called the Windmill. 1 Division began the attack on 23 July, taking a foothold in the ruins of the village. In two days, it suffered 5 285 casualties. When 2 Division took over, it attacked towards the Windmill. On that first day, 5 Battalion's advance was repulsed by a German counter-attack and it suffered forty-five men killed, 248 men wounded, and 159 missing. On 26 July, probably because of its heavy casualty list, the battalion was relieved in the front trenches by 17 Battalion and it moved into nearby reserve trenches. On the twenty-seventh, it moved towards and through the town of Albert, finally reaching Bonneville on 30 July. George joined it four days later. His stay with his comrades was short, however. On 18 August, nine days later, after the battalion had returned to the front lines at Pozières two days earlier, George was wounded in action. On the seventeenth, two officers and 150 other ranks prepared to attack from the so-called "jumping off" trench. The Germans may have got wind of this action, as the commander reported heavy shelling on the front line and the communication trenches later that same day. The attack, when it occurred the next day, led to thirty-three men being killed and eighty-nine wounded. George was probably among the latter group.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

The main street of Pozières village, photographed in late 1916

A05776

(AWM A05776)

On 14 September 1916, George was reported as being in Northumberland War Hospital in Newcastle upon Tyne, suffering from shell shock. Just how long he was there, however, we do not know, because there is no other entry into his record until 1 August the following year, when he was appointed to the overseas training battalion. Seven days later, however, he was charged with being out of bounds in Ludgershall, a town north-east of Salisbury, Wiltshire. After recovering from the shell shock, he had obviously been moved to Perham Downs (on Salisbury Plain) to undergo rehabilitation and further training, and then appointment to the training battalion. His indiscretion on the twelfth suggested that he was back to full fitness and quite possibly bored. Anyway, it brought him the punishment of One Day's Field Punishment Number Two. This involved being placed in fetters or handcuffs, while undertaking hard labour and suffering loss of pay. Whether George was cured of his wanderlust by his punishment we do not know, but it is interesting to note that, only four months later, he was promoted to the rank of temporary sergeant. Perhaps he had become a model soldier in the meantime.

There are no other entries in George's record until 25 October 1918, so it would seem that he never went back to the war after suffering from shell shock. On that date, he was granted seventy-five days' leave with pay until 9 January 1919. This was a special leave granted to the surviving volunteers of 1914. He was also paid twenty-two pounds, being deferred pay from 1914.

On 10 May 1919, George sailed for Australia. We presume that his wife was with him, sailing as a private citizen. Once back in Australia, George applied to the war department for the refund of his wife's fare. Whether he received it or not, we do not know.

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