

Narrative of Experiences by Captain Waldo Hyman Zander, 30th Battalion, A.I.F.

Warehouseman of Sydney; born Brisbane November 1892; joined the A.I.F. on 26/5/15; promoted sergeant on 1/8/15. 2/1 lieut. On 3/4/16, lieutenant on 25/11/16, tempy captain on 26/8/18; captain on 26/10/18; was wounded on 4/11/16; appointment terminated 14/9/19.

With the 5th Australian Division at "Fromelles"
July 19th, 1916

"FROMELLES"!! What memories that word brings back to our minds. Our first scrap – and what a bitter one! The rumour first started at BOIS GRENIER when we were in the line there. A stunt! – we little knew what it meant, but to us it seemed something wonderfully new and exciting – a chance for a chap to win his laurels and make good. The usual conference took place amongst the "Heads" – then the secret was out.

We moved one night to FLEURBAIX and were billeted there. Then more conferences and some vague details of what was to come. We split into our little parties and made our way up to the various avenues to reconnoiter the lay of the ground, CELLAR FARM, YORK, MINE and V.C. avenues – up these we went, looking about us, getting lost, then on the right track again until we returned home with the conviction that we knew we had to know. "Secrecy must be strictly observed" we were told and we told the men this, but in every estaminet in the neighbourhood there was nothing else to be heard but the "STUNT". Even the M'selles asked us when it was coming off. Artillery began to move up and dig themselves in, while the roads near the entrances of the avenues assumed a more crowded appearance. Dumps sprung up here and there, and every time one went up the C.Ts they passed the men carrying ammunition and "plum puddings". The Bosche couldn't have helped seeing all these preparations, for his planes were over often enough, and spies seemed all over the place. Even the farm where we were billeted in had a girl who we understood was under observation as a suspected spy.

Then we got fuller details – the times of the barrage, the caliber of the guns covering us, our duties etc. It seemed as if all the artillery in France was helping us – at least so we were led to believe according to what we heard. We discussed our plans with our men, allotted them their jobs, and waited for the great day to arrive.

It came at last – the 19th of July 1916 – and feeling more as we were going into some grand big manoeuvre, than our first battle, we moved up the line. "Helmets at the ALERT" we were told, "for there might be gas sent over" so these were adjusted to our chests, (for in those days the S.B.R. was not known). We concentrated in some small sap running off CELLAR FARM avenue, some of us in the sap, the rest under what cover we could get – and that was scanty.

About midday the barrage started, and how wonderful we thought it then – how feeble we think it now! It kept up all the afternoon, slowly diminishing in volume as the day wore on. The Hun didn't seem to be retaliating much, a little shrapnel coming our way but not doing much damage. Further ahead we could hear the occasional "crumps" of his 5.9s, but as we were not very near them we didn't worry. Then word came to move up further and line the Support Line. Cautiously we did this and settled ourselves there. It was allright for about 10 minutes, then the Bosche opened up, as it seemed to us, especially at us. The 5.9s and 4.2s came in pairs, some over, some under, but a few found their mark, and our faces grew sad as we saw some of our pals going away on stretchers endeavouring not to show the agony they were suffering from their wounds.

Zero hour approached (6pm) and then our barrage increased over the 31st and 32nd battalions. We began to move up CELLAR FARM avenue to carry out our role in the fight – "carrying parties". The way was blocked here and there by direct hit by enemy shells on the Communication trenches, but the men soon jumped out and passed these obstructions. The front line was reached at last and we made our way along it to our appointed places. Dead seemed to be everywhere – one man had got a hit from a shell and half his face was blown away. He lay across the duckboard track, blocking it. A sergeant stepped forwards and shifted him to the side, while another person covered the dead man's face with a bloodstained tunic lying near. It seemed so terrible to us – there dead lying all around – but we were not used to the sight of dead

then. Further along the line a dump of ammunition was alight, and as the flames got a further grip the cartridges started to explode. Their staccato explosions could be heard clearly against the dull crashes of the heavy shells bursting nearby. We passed this dump and reached our position.

Hastily we grabbed shovels, sandbags, and duckboards, and after being shown from the parapet the direction we were to take we hopped over into "No Man's Land". The enemy barrage now had lifted, and we could see way ahead of the Bosche's original front line our shells and the enemy's bursting. We made our way in little groups of men in single file across "No Man's Land", dodging shellholes, falling into some, cursing in our anxiety to get there quickly, and getting caught in the wire that lay all over the place.

It seemed very easy and simple so far, but the sharp cracking of a machine gun on our flank soon taught us that the Bosche had seen us. A couple of men fell, the rest, crouching lower, continued their way. The Bosche wire at last! We saw how our trench mortars and artillery had made great gaps in it, and through these gaps we hurried. We reached his parapet and jumped and slid down into the trench. Here a brief "breather" was taken while some scouted out ahead to see the lay of the land, and where the Battalions in front of us were. The parties now divided up again, and ducking and stumbling (for the Bosche was shelling his old line heavily) made their way forward.

We had been told that on no account were we to help either of the Battalions ahead of us, as our work was entirely "carrying" supplies up to them, also food, water etc. But once up there it was the greatest trouble to get our chaps to go back to their carrying. They wanted to stop up there and "box on" with their chums in the 31st and 32nd, and to bag a few Fritzs if possible.

My particular job was to stay in the Hun old front line, and to control supplies as they came up, directing them to whatever part of the line required them most. By this time the Bosche had seen what was going on, (for it was still light and men were moving about all over the place) and put down a beautiful barrage in No Man's Land. His old line and our original line did not escape either, but in No Man's Land it was heaviest. But this barrage didn't stop the men, for all night long the parties kept on arriving with duckboards, sandbags and various other supplies as well as ammunition. It was a veritable Hell in No Man's Land all that night, but not for one moment did the men falter or hang back. The Ammunition dump we had passed when we first made our way along our own old front line was still burning, and its dull red glow was a godsend to us that night, acting as a guiding mark where to get supplies from, (for the end of the light railway was quite near it, and to here the engineering supplies were sent).

As the night wore on our artillery seemed to slacken in volume, but the Bosche's if anything increased. It was pitch dark, and one could only get glimpses of things by the flashes of the exploding shells. The Hun sent some incendiary shells over, and these set light to anything they came in contact with when they burst, their flickering flames throwing a ghostly light over the dead and debris lying about. One poor wretch who had his arm blown off by a shell was crawling painfully across No Man's Land, endeavouring to reach shelter and aid when one of these diabolical incendiary shells burst nearby, splattering him with burning contents. By the light made by a bursting shell he was seen to be frantically trying to smother the flames that were eating into his very flesh, tearing up handfuls of mud and earth in his endeavor and agony. His screams could be heard for a second or two – then silence! Fate had at last taken pity on him and had taken him into her arms for that last sleep where there is no waking. His body we passed the next morning, one side cruelly charred and burnt.

All this time one of our companies was feverishly digging a sap, endeavouring to join our old front line with the Hun's. Unfortunately the Hun enfiladed part of this sap, and soon the casualties started to mount up. The officers of this company began to fall but one remained. Still they stuck to their work, and heroically dug away, though in rapidly diminishing numbers.

Early next morning (the 20th) while it was still dark the Hun artillery seemed to quicken and increase, machine guns staccato cracks could be heard, and the rifle fire swelled in volume. "The Bosche is counter attacking" was passed back to us. The firing continued for a while, then it died down. Eagerly we plied the parties returning for fresh loads for news. "All OK, the Bosche beaten off" we were told.

By this time urgent messages for reinforcements were being sent back by those in front, but no signs of these were to be seen. Towards dawn, as the day was just beginning to break another counter-attack developed, in greater force it seemed to us from what we could see and hear. Then we saw some Machine gunners running back towards us, and setting up their guns in the old Bosche front line. We asked them the reason, and were told that they had received orders to fall back, take up a defensive position and cover the coming retirement of the chaps in front.

Gradually the people in front began to dribble back, taking up a defensive position on the Bosche old front line. We could see the Hun advancing, and now his barrage came down on the part of the line where we were. At the same time the enemy commenced to bomb in from the flanks, and there was nothing but for us to fall back and regain our original line. This was done slowly, while others covered their retirement with Lewis guns as they made their way across No Man's Land. One Lewis gun crew on the Brigade's extreme right flank stuck to it to the last, and after all the rest had fallen back they could still be heard firing. We saw some stick bombs thrown into their little stronghold – then silence! Their job had been done at the expense of their lives. They died like the heroes they were.

I shall never forget the trip back across No Man's Land. The Bosche had machine guns firing on us from both flanks, and it seemed as if all the machine guns in the army were trained on us. The bullets whistled and cracked all around us, and yet few were knocked. How we escaped I don't know, for the range was but 300-400 yards.

At last we got to our line and manned it. We cast our eyes around – what a changed scene! How different it was to the one we saw when we made our way along it the night before. The Hun barrage had played havoc with the trenches – huge gaps yawned here and there, parapets in places were blown entirely in, fire bays completely wiped out, and the whole place littered with dead and debris.

We kept up a fire on the Bosches whenever they could be seen, and one could clearly notice them, moving about in their line, and in rear of it. About 8 or 9 o'clock we were relieved by the 29th Bn. And moved back to a position in support, in the vicinity of CROIX-BLANCHE cross roads. Here a roll call was taken and what a sad weary lot answered. Some platoons were platoons in name only, having but 2 or 3 men left out of the 40-50 that had started out so gaily the previous day. Others showed great gaps in them where their members had "gone west" and made the great sacrifice.

Someone passed the word "RUM" along – Gee! How everyone brightened up at once, and how like nectar that little nip tasted to us. We had our drink, and then turned in, lying anywhere we could, by the side of the road, in the fields, anywhere so long as we got a sleep.

In the afternoon parties were called for to go and collect wounded and dead in No Man's Land. Although the men were dead tired and weary there was no trouble getting the numbers required, the men being only too willing to go and see if they could find their mates lying perhaps dead or wounded in the open between the two lines of trenches.

While we waited experiences and yarns were exchanged, and many were the tales of Bosche treachery. One in particular is interesting. A Bosche officer was found wounded in the old Hun front line by a young Australian officer. The Hun made a gesture that he was wounded and maimed, and asked pitifully for water. The Australian officer unfastened his water bottle and slung it over to the Hun, keeping a little distance away from him. The Hun bent down to pick up the water bottle which had fallen at his feet, and as he did so he whipped out a revolver and fired point-blank at his would-be benefactor. Luckily the shot missed, but not so the Australian officer's one. That Hun didn't get another chance to play any more treacherous tricks.

And so ended FROMELLES! – our first scrap. What memories rise up when we think of it all – and what pangs of anguish as we think of all our mates who went under in those two days. FROMELLES will always live in the memory of the 30th Bn. As our first real baptism of fire. How well the Bn. acquitted itself remains for others to say.

