Private Frederick John Stevens Aspinall (1890–1916)

Early Life and Family

Frederick John Stevens Aspinall, also known on some records as Ferdinand, was born in 1890 in the leafy suburb of Hunters Hill, Sydney. He was the son of Edward and Jane Aspinall and one of several siblings in a close-knit family. The Aspinalls later moved to the Fairfield-Liverpool area, a growing working-class district in western Sydney. Frederick attended Hunters Hill Public School, where he received a basic education before entering the workforce. Like many young men of his era, he took on manual labour jobs and eventually worked as a labourer and packer, reportedly for the railways. He was known to be of solid build and good character, a steady young man with a strong sense of duty.

Enlistment and Training

As the Great War engulfed Europe, Frederick enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force on 16 August 1915. He was 25 years old. Assigned the service number 3230, he became part of the 9th to 12th reinforcements for the 4th Battalion. In October that year, he embarked from Sydney aboard HMAT Port Lincoln, bound for Egypt. After arriving in the Middle East, Frederick underwent further training while stationed near the Suez Canal. It was during this time that the AIF expanded its forces, forming new battalions to meet the demands of the Western Front.

In February 1916, Frederick was transferred to the newly formed 53rd Battalion, comprised of Gallipoli veterans and new recruits like himself. The battalion trained rigorously in the desert, adapting to military life and preparing for the challenges ahead. In June, the 53rd set sail for France, arriving in Marseille and travelling north by train to the front lines of the Western Front.

The Western Front and the Battle of Fromelles

By early July 1916, the 53rd Battalion had entered the trenches near Fleurbaix, opposite the village of Fromelles. The conditions were dismal – cold, muddy, and riddled with constant danger. After only a few days on the front, Frederick and his battalion were ordered to take part in what would become Australia's first major battle on the Western Front.

On the evening of 19 July 1916, the 53rd Battalion launched an assault as part of a broader Allied attack designed to divert German forces from the Somme. Their objective was to capture German trenches near the Sugar Loaf salient, a heavily fortified position. As the men went over the top at 6pm, they were met with ferocious machine-gun fire. Despite the chaos and carnage, many of the 53rd reached the enemy lines and engaged in close-quarters combat.

The battle quickly descended into tragedy. The flanking units failed to secure their objectives, leaving the 53rd exposed. Isolated and under constant attack, the men were forced to retreat under cover of darkness in the early hours of 20 July. Frederick was among the many who did not return.

Legacy and Remembrance

Initially listed as missing, Frederick was later confirmed to have been killed in action on 19 July 1916. He was just 26 years old. Like so many of his comrades, his body was never recovered, and he has no known grave.

Frederick is commemorated at VC Corner Australian Cemetery and Memorial near Fromelles, where 410 unidentified soldiers are buried in mass graves and the names of 1,299 missing Australians are inscribed on the memorial wall. His name is also honoured on the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra and likely appears on memorials in his hometown of Hunters Hill.

He is also remembered on his mother Jane's headstone in Liverpool Cemetery, which poignantly bears the words: "Private F. Aspinall, 53rd Batt., killed in France 19th July 1916."

Frederick Aspinall's story is one of quiet heroism – an ordinary young man who answered the call of duty and made the ultimate sacrifice. Though his life was cut tragically short, his memory lives on in the hearts of those who honour the service and sacrifice of the men of the 53rd Battalion and all who served in the Great War.

Lest we forget.