

Corporal Frederick Almonde Coe

Rod Martin

Hailing from Maryborough, Frederick Coe was a teacher at St. Thomas's Grammar School in Essendon – later to become Essendon Grammar School. He was twenty-six when he signed up on 29 February 1916. At just over 171 centimetres tall, and weighing sixty-three kilos, he was a slight man, fair haired and blue-eyed. Just why he took so long to enlist is open to conjecture, as is the reason why he chose to join a machine gun company rather than the infantry. He had no previous military experience, and therefore no experience of firing or even handling machine guns. Nevertheless, he went to Geelong to train at 19 Depot Battery, and then moved in April to 2 Reinforcements, 2 Machine Gun Company at an instructional school in Port Melbourne.

After the experience of Gallipoli in 1915, the military authorities decided in February 1916 to bring together the machine gun sections allocated to each battalion and form machine gun companies. Each company was allocated to a brigade and re-equipped with Vickers medium machine guns. 2 MG Company was assigned to a brigade of 1 Australian Division. Presumably, Frederick trained on the new machine gun at Port Melbourne. The gun weighed between eleven and fourteen kilos and had a six to eight man crew: one to fire the gun, one to feed the ammunition, and the rest helping to carry the weapon, its ammunition and spare parts (such as replacement barrels). When the lighter Lewis machine gun was introduced in early 1916, the Vickers groups, that were initially made up of infantrymen, became known as specialist heavy machine gun companies.



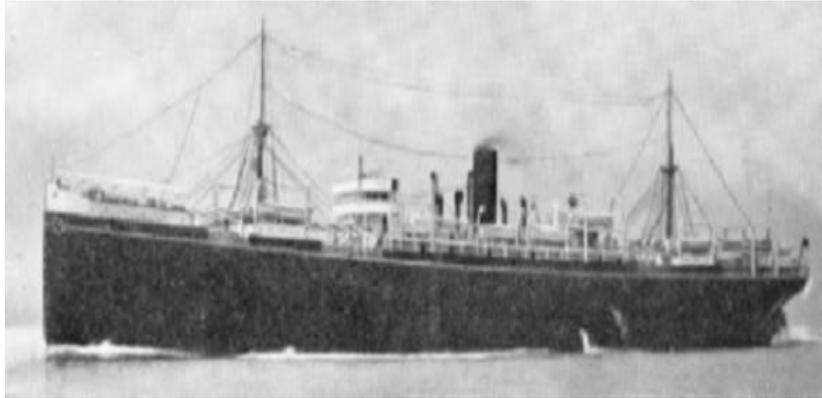
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P04684.002

A Vickers medium machine gun

(AWM P04684.002)

After completing their training, Frederick and his compatriots moved to the nearby Port Melbourne piers on 4 May and boarded A17 HMAT *Port Lincoln*, ready to sail for Egypt.



HMAT *Port Lincoln*

(AWM H15982)

Troopships were still sailing via the Suez Canal in early to mid-1916 and, upon arrival in Egypt, Frederick and the other reinforcements were transported to the Australian training camp at Tel el Kebir, arriving on 5 July. Their stay in the desert was short. On the twenty-ninth of that month, they boarded HMT *Arcadia* and sailed for England.

Frederick's records indicate that the reinforcements stayed at a training base in England until late November 1916, when they transferred to France, landing at Boulogne. They finally joined 2 MG Company on 1 December – just in time to 'enjoy' what was described as the worst European winter for forty years. The company was located in reserve at Buire, near the town of Albert, and not far from the river Ancre – a tributary of the Somme. The greatest battle of the war, beginning the previous July and conducted on the Somme, had resulted in the gaining of some territory from the Germans. However, no strategic advantage had been achieved and the human cost to Australia had been horrendous. In July, the 1 Division attack at Pozières had resulted in 5 285 casualties in two days. The overall Australian casualties in forty-five days on the Somme front were 24 139 for the gain of the ruined village of Pozières and the ridge behind it.

The start of 1917 found the company in an area north of the Somme River. Action was only slight because of the intensity of the winter weather. However, late in January, the Germans began a strategic retreat to the heavily fortified Hindenburg Line. Attrition forced them to rationalise their defence line to remove salients ('bumps') that required heavy defences for no strategic advantage. Nevertheless, the Germans were not going to cede territory without putting up a fight. Booby traps and bombardments were waiting for the allied troops as they cautiously moved forward. By the beginning of February, 2 MG Company found itself located near Flers, north of the Somme. German aircraft and artillery were active, and the company provided covering fire for the infantry as it steadily advanced..

April and May 1917 saw two assaults on the Hindenburg Line near the town of Bullecourt. The first attack, hastily organised by the British Fifth Army commander, General Sir Hubert Gough, was an unmitigated disaster, costing the Australian 4 Division approximately 3 000 casualties. The second attack, slightly more successful, involved 1 and 2 Divisions in early May. 2 MG Company supported the assault by aiming indirect fire on to the defences at the nearby town of Quéant and

direct fire on to any target that presented itself on that front and in the direction of Bullecourt. A foothold was established in the Hindenburg Line and was held despite a German counter-attack. However, little more was achieved, and the cost to 1, 2 and 5 Divisions over a period of fourteen days was 7 000 casualties.



Members of 22 MG Company firing at enemy aircraft, Bullecourt, April 1917 (AWM E00458)

In the middle of all this action the company's officers had to conduct polling for the Australian federal election. They carried it out during the night of 4 May with great difficulty, due to the fact that 'most of the machine gun positions were under direct observation & were isolated, the advanced positions being very near the enemy & in open MG emplacements.' Still, the men had to be given the opportunity to vote (compulsory voting was not introduced until 1924), and 113 ballots were recorded.

The company relieved others on a quieter section of the front line a couple of days later, but it was still in danger. One man was gassed on 6 May, and another was killed by shellfire two days after. On the ninth, the unit commander described the situation as 'precarious', continual German barrages suggesting that an attack was imminent. However, the intensity finally died down, and the unit went into reserve the next day.

Frederick and his compatriots spent the next three months in various forms of training before moving north to the Ypres area in Belgium in mid-September. The Third Battle of Ypres had begun in June, designed to capture the occupied Belgian coast and demoralise the enemy. However, the plan relied upon good weather, as rain in the area would quickly turn the fragile clay soils of Flanders into glutinous mud. Right on time, the heavens burst forth on 31 July, the first day of the major assault. The whole attack quickly bogged down, men, horses and equipment disappearing into the morass.

There were a few days of fine weather around 20 September, and a cleverly planned 'bite and hold' attack, masterminded by British 2 Army commander Sir Herbert Plumer and Major-General John Monash, saw the Australian 1 and 2 Divisions attack German positions in the Menin Road area east of Ypres. The Germans were driven back to nearby Polygon Wood in a few short hours. 2 MG Company was involved, advancing with its brigade at 5.40 am. By 10.50 am, all but one gun had reached their objectives. The missing gun had been destroyed by shellfire. Presumably, the soldiers manning it had been destroyed or wounded as well. The Germans counter-attacked at 7 pm that evening, but they were successfully repulsed. However, the cost to the unit was high: five men were killed and twenty-two wounded. In addition, two men assigned to protect a group from brigade headquarters were killed and three others wounded.

The next day, the Germans counter-attacked again, but were repulsed once more. One machine gun brought down an enemy aircraft.



British machine gunners, Menin Road, 21 September 1917 (IWM Q2864)

Two days later, the company went into reserve at Steenvorde. The commander noted at the end of the month that he was short eighteen other ranks. The combat had been quite ferocious. On 21 September alone, the Germans had counter-attacked again at 7 pm. The result was the same as the night before, but the company lost four men killed and fourteen wounded.

It was probably because of these losses that, on 4 October, Frederick was promoted to lance-corporal and then, on the fifteenth, to corporal 'to complete establishment'. On the fourth, 1, 2 and 3 divisions, along with the New Zealanders, had attacked and captured Broodseinde Ridge. The cost, however, had been considerable once again. There were 6 500 casualties, the company's contribution being four killed, ten wounded and one missing. On 6 October the weather, which had been fine for the attacks at Menin Road, Polygon Wood (26 September) and Broodseinde, deteriorated. Heavy rain fell and the ground turned to mud once more.

2 MG Company moved out of the front line on the tenth and to a training camp near Renninghelst. It remained in the Ypres area until mid-November, experiencing wet, miserable weather and sporadic attacks by enemy aircraft. It suffered a number of casualties while many of the men had target practice, shooting at German aircraft. During all of this, it would appear that Frederick remained unscathed.



A Vickers MG crew (wearing gas masks) firing at the enemy. (IWM Q3996)

By the beginning of December the company had moved back to France, camping at Desvres, inland from the port of Boulogne. On the tenth of the month, Frederick went on leave, not returning until Christmas Eve. The unit's war diary records that he went to England, no doubt to enjoy the pleasures that London could provide.

During his absence, the company had moved back to the Ypres area in Belgium, camping at Wytshaete. It moved into the front line on 14 December. Despite Third Ypres having finally dissipated in the wet weather the previous month, action was still occurring along the line. On the day that Frederick returned, one of his comrades was killed and one wounded, and a machine gun destroyed by shellfire.

The start of 1918 saw the company in reserve. It stayed that way during January and February, based at Locre, close to the French border. However, the men were far from being safe. During March, a number of them suffered from gas shell attacks and had to be evacuated. Their real testing time was still to come, however. Late in the month, the Germans launched a final effort to break the stalemate and win the war before greater numbers of American troops arrived on the scene (The United States had declared war on Germany the previous year). On 5 April, the company received orders to transfer to the Somme region, the centre of the German assault. Their new location was not far from the important railway junction town of Amiens, one of the foci of the German attack. However, they were soon moved north to Hazebrouck and became engaged in a fierce fight until they were relieved on the nineteenth of the month. They were defending the Hazebrouck-Armentières railway line. The Germans were moving towards the town of Bailleul, but the Australians held them off, being involved in some fierce fighting amongst hedges, houses and other obstructions. All the while, the Germans were shelling the troops on a regular basis.

This was as far as the Germans reached. From 24 April, the situation stalemated, the sting having gone from their initial advance. The Germans had been repelled from Villers-Bretonneux on Anzac Day and, in Frederick's area, they were making no attempt to control No Man's Land between the front lines. From the beginning of May, the Allies began slowly but steadily pushing the Germans back. On 8 August, the Allies launched their counter-offensive, beginning with the Battle of Amiens. Masterminded by Monash, the victory was won in twelve hours, the Allies advancing almost thirteen kilometres on a front almost fifteen thousand metres wide. German general Erich Ludendorff described the day as the 'black one' for the German Army. 2 MG Company was still in transit to Harbonnieres when the attack began and followed on after the battalions on the ninth. It was now once again a war of movement, the company only stopping to dig in on the twelfth. The Germans were not going to move without a fight, however. They bombed and strafed the Allies from the air, as well as fighting them on the ground. In those three days, the company expended 20 000 rounds in protective fire and at scattered targets. It lost two men killed and one wounded.

By 16 August, Frederick and his mates were bathing in the River Somme and receiving a clean change of clothing.



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A00925

The Somme near Vaux, 1918. The various lagoons made combat difficult in this area. (AWM A00925)

They were on the move again by 23 August, passing through a place called Dennis Wood. The enemy laid down an intense barrage, and the company suffered ten casualties. The men had to wear their gas masks for several hours because the Germans fired a large number of gas shells at them. On that day, 2 MG Company lost one man killed and twenty wounded. One man was reported missing. The company was relieved on 26 August, but Frederick's luck finally ran out around that time. He was caught in a gas attack and invalided out to England. His war was over.

Frederick was still convalescent in February 1919. As late as 10 January he had been reported as being dangerously ill. However, he must have recovered fairly quickly after that time, as he went absent without leave between the nineteenth and the thirtieth of the month. For that sin he was severely reprimanded and lost eleven days'

pay. He was probably one of many who took unofficial leave in England now that the war was over.

Frederick was still in England in May, and he applied for paid leave to study organic chemistry at the South-western Polytechnic in Chelsea. However, this leave was cancelled almost as soon as it was granted. It is possible that he was scheduled to sail for home soon after, and that probably took precedence. He embarked on 4 July, arriving back in Melbourne on 18 August.

In Frederick's case, it is hard to know the long-term effects of the gas. He was back teaching at St. Thomas's by late 1923, so he could not have been too bad. However, it would seem that he had been affected in some way because he did apply for a disability pension. In the 1920s, the officer in charge of base records asked the deputy commissioner of repatriation if he received one. Unfortunately, the reply (if there was one) is not included in Frederick's war record, so we do not know the outcome.

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