

Edgar Robert Sherman
1895–1917
– His life remembered –

In the words of a newspaper report from the Goulburn Evening Penny Post, published on 2 December 1915:

A ball was held in the Oddfellow's Hall in aid of Allies Day Fund. Advantage was taken of the occasion to bid farewell to two of our soldier boys who were on their final leave. The Reverend Canon Ross Edwards spoke of the brave lads who were going to fight for King and Country. Mr Fairley gave an address. Mr J.A. Hogg, in a neat speech, made a presentation to his mates. Sid Shepherd was presented with a sheepskin vest and a fountain pen, and Edgar Sherman was presented with a soldier's writing wallet and a fountain pen. Both suitably responded. They left on Monday by the passenger train, a great number of their friends being on the station to see them off, and as the train steamed out a loud cheer was raised.¹

Edgar Robert Sherman was born at Braidwood, New South Wales (NSW), on 13 September 1895.² He was the second son of Frederick Sherman and Emma Martha Sherman nee Tomkins – they were married at St Columba Presbyterian Church, Woollahra, NSW, in 1892,³ before moving to the Southern Tablelands,⁴ and later, the Southern Highlands.⁵

Edgar's father, Frederick 'Sheerman', was born at Whitway, near Burghclere, Hampshire, England, in 1864.⁶ Frederick's father, Robert 'Sheerman', was a blacksmith.⁷ Their forebears, John and Frances West, established a charity in 1721 in England to provide pensions and scholarships, which exists to this day.⁸ Frederick's mother, Harriet Sheerman nee Palmer, was from a farming family also located at Burghclere.⁹ Frederick came to Australia as an artisan assisted immigrant in 1884.¹⁰ Around this time, he dropped an 'e' in his surname and 'Sheerman' became Sherman. Frederick was a baker,¹¹ Justice of the Peace (JP),¹² grazier¹³ and a businessperson, with bakeries at Braidwood and Moss Vale,¹⁴ and a horse-drawn carriage run from Moss Vale to Marulan, NSW.¹⁵

Edgar's mother, Emma Martha Sherman nee Tomkins, was born at Yea, Victoria, Australia, in 1870.¹⁶ The Tomkins family was originally from Yorkshire, England – they moved to Ireland to supply horses for the British army.¹⁷ Emma's father, John Moffatt Tomkins, was born at Wexford, Ireland, and when he was 5 years old he sailed to Australia with his parents James Tomkins and Elizabeth Tomkins nee Moffatt, and 2 siblings, arriving at Port Phillip Bay, Victoria, in 1840.¹⁸ The family continued agricultural pursuits at Preston and Mansfield, Victoria – in horses and refining the Hereford breed of cattle^{19,20} – and won first prize for a cow and calf at the inaugural Port Phillip Show.²¹ Emma's mother, Elizabeth Lowry Tomkins nee Henry, was born at Down, Ireland.²² She emigrated to Australia with her family when she was 4 years old, arriving in 1842.^{23,24} Elizabeth was the daughter of Mary Carswell and Robert Henry, JP – Robert served in the King's Life Guard²⁵ – they were formerly of Henry Hill, County Down, Ireland, and later of Kardinia Cattle Station, Victoria, Australia.²⁶ Emma's family moved to the Maitland district, NSW,²⁷ in the 1880s.

Edgar was one of 7 siblings, all of whom were born at Braidwood except his youngest sister, Gwen Rose, who was born at Moss Vale, in 1910.²⁸ William, who was born 3 years after Edgar in 1898, died in infancy.²⁹

Edgar's parents, Frederick and Emma, farewelled their children one by one as they left home. First to leave home was their eldest child, Annie Winifred (Nancy), and later their second daughter, Alice Harriet (Pet), to pursue careers in nursing. Nancy worked as a theatre sister until her marriage in 1923,³⁰ when she was 29 years old, and Pet worked as a children's nurse until her marriage in 1926,³¹ when she was 30.

Percy, their eldest son, was next to leave home.

On 21 August 1914, Percy joined up for service abroad with the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) at the Regimental Office in Goulburn, NSW,³² and on 27 August 1914, he was enlisted at Kensington, NSW.³³ Percy's service number was 969,³⁴ falling within the first 1,000 recruits. He was assigned to the D Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Infantry Brigade, Australian Imperial Force³⁵ – their objective was an attack on Dardanelles.³⁶ Three weeks into the Gallipoli campaign, Private Percy Sherman, a signaller, was killed in action on 19 May 1915. He was 20 years old. He is commemorated at The Nek Cemetery, Gallipoli, Special Memorial #4.³⁷ Percy's name can be located at Panel 38 in the Commemorative Area at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.³⁸

Three months after his brother Percy's death, Edgar Robert Sherman made the decision to leave home and go to war. Before joining the AIF, Edgar attended Braidwood Public School³⁹ – he was known as a keen sportsperson and he worked as an attendant at Kenmore Hospital for the Insane, Goulburn, NSW.⁴⁰

On 21 August 1915, Edgar was enlisted for service abroad at Goulburn, NSW,⁴¹ a year to the day after Percy joined. Edgar's service number was 1942.⁴² His enlistment details describe him as 19 years and 11 months old, dark complexion, blue eyes and dark brown hair. Edgar was declared fit for service by medical officer WAH Burkitt and assigned to the **6th Light Horse Regiment (13th Reinforcements)**.⁴³

On 20 December 1915, Edgar left Sydney on board HMAT Aeneas A60,⁴⁴ one of 1,745 males bound for the port of Suez, Egypt.⁴⁵ Coincidentally, it was the same day that the 6th Light Horse Regiment withdrew from the Gallipoli peninsula.⁴⁶

On 17 January 1916, Edgar and his fellow travellers disembarked at Egypt – a voyage of 26 days.⁴⁷ A cable confirmed their arrival and was published in the local newspaper:

*Mrs Sherman, of Bethly [Betterly] Park, Marulan, has received a cable from Maadi, Egypt, saying that her son, Edgar, and Mrs Jarvie's son, Sid Shepherd, of the 6th Light Horse, have arrived safely and are well.*⁴⁸

On 17 February 1916, a month after his disembarkation, Edgar was hospitalised in Cairo with mumps following an outbreak on board HMAT Aeneas.⁴⁹ Remarkably, Edgar's service record does not reveal any other illnesses or injuries requiring hospitalisation until the end of his service.⁵⁰

On 24 February 1916, Edgar rejoined his regiment at Maadi, Egypt.⁵¹ This was where the Australian Light Horse Brigades camped with their horses and trained.⁵² The 6th Light Horse Regiment operated in the Middle East throughout the First World War.⁵³

From 1916 to 1917, Edgar's statement of service lists his different roles and transfers, serving under the Anzac Mounted Division, the 5th Australian Division Artillery, and the 2nd Australian Division Artillery.⁵⁴

From 1 March 1916 to 27 March 1916, Edgar was assigned the **2nd reserve of the Light Horse Regiment**,⁵⁵ part of the Anzac Mounted Division. In his letter home from the front, Gunner AH Sloane wrote of his transfer from Light Horse to Artillery, a transfer that Edgar also experienced:

*They are forming up more batteries of the Australian Artillery, and they were calling for volunteers from the Light Horse Unit ... I like the Artillery very much better than the Light Horse; it is more interesting ... You have the guns, waggons, and horses to keep you interested in your work, the mounting and dismounting of a big gun, and the mechanism of the gun, which is all very interesting.*⁵⁶

On 28 March 1916, Edgar was transferred to the **114th Battery, 25th Field Artillery Howitzer Brigade, part of the 5th Australian Division Artillery**, located at the military training camp at Tel-el-Kebir, Egypt, as a **gunner**.⁵⁷ Howitzers, a type of mounted gun, were capable of projecting shells at a high angle so that they could drop down to their target,⁵⁸ rather than having a flat trajectory.

In early May 1916, Edgar left Tel-el-Kebir, the site of the Anglo-Egyptian war of 1882,⁵⁹ and travelled 40 miles to Ferry Post, on the eastern side of the Suez Canal, which operated as a base for troops going to and from the front.⁶⁰

On 10 May 1916, Edgar's role changed again, this time to **mustered driver**,⁶¹ remaining with the **5th Australian Division Artillery** – this meant that in his active service, Edgar did not serve as a gunner. Drivers were responsible for managing a team of horses that negotiated often very challenging ground conditions and pulled the huge, heavy howitzer guns onto a prepared platform and into position for firing.⁶² The teams usually consisted of 6 horses with a mounted rider for each pair, one behind the other. Horses also transported food, supplies and ammunition.⁶³ Astride their mounts, drivers were vulnerable as a visible target for artillery fire.

On 31 May 1916, the 5th Australian Division Artillery moved within Egypt, from Ferry Post to Moascar, prior to boarding the train for an 8-hour journey to Alexandria.⁶⁴

On 18 June 1916, Edgar embarked at Alexandria on HT Georgian, disembarking 27 June 1916 at Marseille, France.⁶⁵ The 5th Australian Division objective was to join the British Expeditionary Force. Captain AD Ellis of the 5th Australian Division described the “rest and charm” of the voyage through the Mediterranean as “one of the most grateful interludes in the history of the Division”.⁶⁶

Private GF Glover described his own journey by sea and rail in a letter home from “somewhere in France”, around the same time as Edgar embarked:

*What a relief when we embarked, to leave behind the sand and flies! ... We were all served with life belts ... in case of emergency ... At night no lights were allowed on deck; smoking was forbidden. All the time we were watched over by our patrol boats ... on the following Sunday we arrived in France, went ashore, marched to the station and entrained at midnight. The people gave us a rousing reception all the way ... women and children brought us flowers. We left the train on Wednesday and after some days we were on the move again for the front, and after a three days' march, arrived at our destination.*⁶⁷

After travelling by train from Marseille, past Paris, Amiens, Abbeville, Etaples, Boulogne, Calais, and on for 30 miles, infantry units were distributed to billets around the area. However, the artillery travelled on to Le Havre where they accessed the Artillery Supply Base to restock, then entrained to Erzinghem and travelled by road to Lynde.⁶⁸

On 7 July 1916, Edgar was transferred to the **115th Howitzer Battery**,⁶⁹ **25th Field Artillery Brigade**, still part of the **5th Australian Division Artillery** in France, and still as a **driver**. On that day, 7 July, important changes in the artillery brigades were made “to distribute the howitzer batteries through three of the four brigades instead of keeping them all as one brigade”.⁷⁰ Edgar, originally assigned to a howitzer brigade, was now assigned to a howitzer battery within a brigade to align with this redistribution.

On 19 July 1916, the inexperienced 5th Australian Division alongside the 61st British Division, in the Battle of Fromelles, attacked the German frontline on open ground near Aubers Ridge in an effort to divert German troops from being moved to the Somme. The Australian and British soldiers were in line of sight of the German lines, and over 2,000 men were killed in action or died of wounds and 400 were taken prisoner.⁷¹ This battle is said to have caused the greatest loss of Australian lives in a 24-hour period.⁷² Edgar survived, and he remained with the 5th Australian Division Artillery to defend the line near Armentieres for nearly 3 months afterwards. In Captain Ellis' words, “The sharp, terrible experience of Fromelles caused the men to develop very quickly from novices into veterans”.⁷³

On 13 October 1916, the New Zealand Division relieved the 5th Australian Division and most moved to Bailleul for entraining to the Ailly-le-Haut-Clocher area on the lower Somme. The first campaign of the 5th Australian Division was closed.⁷⁴ The 5th Australian Division Artillery remained to defend the line for an additional month, finally rejoining their division on the lower Somme about 20 November 1916.⁷⁵

The Somme battle had started on 1 July 1916, about 4 months before the 5th Australian Division arrived at the end of October 1916. During September, before their arrival, wind, snow and ice prevailed and continued through a bitterly cold winter – heavy rains turned the battlefield mud into a quagmire. According to Captain Ellis, “Moving the guns themselves was an act of almost superhuman exertion. As many as 14 horses were required in many places to move an ordinary transport waggon”.⁷⁶

Captain Ellis informs that the 5th Australian Division campaign at the Somme consisted of 2 phases:

Phase 1: 20 October 1916 to 22 February 1917, held the line with no major operations.

Phase 2: 22 February 1917 to June 1917, saw much fighting, with the opposition withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line and attacks near Bullecourt.⁷⁷

As part of Phase 1 and into Phase 2, Edgar spent 9 months with the **115th Howitzer Battery, 25th Field Artillery Brigade**, in the **5th Australian Division Artillery** as a **driver**.

During Phase 2, on 3 April 1917, Edgar was transferred to the **106th Howitzer Battery, France**,⁷⁸ **6th Field Artillery Brigade**,⁷⁹ now in the **2nd Australian Division Artillery** and continuing as a **driver**. One reason divisions were reorganised as war progressed was to reinforce numbers.⁸⁰

Edgar's experiences as a driver were likely to have been very similar to Driver Tass Bland, also of the 106th Howitzer Battery in France, who described managing a team of horses at the front in his letter home:

*After putting the gun in position we made tracks for home (waggon lines). We were rounding a place called Windy Corner (red hot for shell fire) when a shell burst on the roadside, hitting my offside horse ... things got busy for the next few minutes ... Our horses went mad and bolted and we had some rough ride for a while. About half-a-dozen others got knocked all around us, and goodness knows how we escaped. When my horse fell I was thrown across the pole, but by a miracle scrambled back into the saddle, and when I got set again I can tell you we made the pace a welter.*⁸¹

On 16 April 1917, still with the **106th Howitzer Battery, 6th Field Artillery Brigade, 2nd Australian Division Artillery**, Edgar's role changed to **shoeing smith**, to provide critical support for horses⁸² in transporting artillery, supplies and the wounded. Driver Tass Bland described the conditions underfoot:

*It is impossible to take the ammunition to the guns in waggons owing to the bad state of the country, and it has to be dumped on the roadside, and we then pack it on horseback and go across country to the pits. It is pitiable to see the state of the surrounding country, and you would not imagine a more desolate scene. For miles the trees have been blown off at the butts, and the ground is one mass of huge shell holes with not five square yards even ground between each hole. The big shells tear holes about thirty feet round and fifteen to twenty feet deep.*⁸³

An answer to a newspaper query at the time informed that “[Shoeing smiths] would not be kept idle when there were no horses to shoe. They would have to prepared and should be prepared to do the other work of a soldier”.⁸⁴

Edgar joined the 2nd Australian Division a month before the division took part in the Arras Offensive: Second Battle of Bullecourt.

From 3 to 17 May 1917, the 2nd Australian Division fought off attack, captured the town of Bullecourt, and gained a part of Hindenburg Line.⁸⁵ In his official history of the war, Charles Bean wrote:

*The Second Bullecourt was the most brilliant of these achievements, impressing enemy and friends alike; it was, in some ways, the stoutest achievement of the Australian soldier in France, carried through against the stubbornest enemy that ever faced him there.*⁸⁶

Afterwards, the 2nd Australian Division was sent to the Somme for rest and training. While they were there, news filtered through about the victory at Messines, outlined as follows, and about emerging plans for operations involving the 2nd Australian Division Artillery at the Ypres salient.⁸⁷ A salient is a bulge in a territory front line that enables attack on 3 sides, thus making it dangerous for troops to occupy the space within.⁸⁸

On 7 June 1917, a huge explosion of 19 mines at Hill 60 occurred underneath German positions. In the year before the explosion, Australian tunnellers had dug a network of tunnels to plant mines. Enormous craters were created by the explosion.⁸⁹ Described by a soldier eyewitness, "Thousands of tons of clay, sand, and soil, pillboxes, concrete, iron and steel, men and material went hurtling heavenwards. It seemed as though the very bowels of the earth must have burst".⁹⁰ Pillboxes were concrete field fortifications built by Germans.⁹¹

The Battle of Messines followed the explosion, ending on 14 June 1917 – it was recognised as a turning point in the war. Captain Alex Scott explained:

*The Messines Ridge ... dominated a wide stretch of country from the River Douve northwards to Ypres itself ... As a preliminary to an advance east of Ypres, which if successful would not only clear the salient, but the whole Belgian coast as well, and remove the submarine menace from the Channel ports, it was necessary to gain possession of Messines ... So effective was the shock of the explosions that the initial infantry advance met with very little resistance; and so well had the advance been organised that the whole of the captured ridge was held and consolidated in spite of the most determined counter-attacks.*⁹²

On 8 and 9 July 1917, the artilleries of the 1st, 2nd and 5th Australian Divisions moved from the Somme, across the Ypres-Comines Canal to the Zillebeke Lake area. According to Charles Bean:

*After a week's march [they] reached the bleak village of Dickebusch, three miles south-west of Ypres. In the muddy fields around this cluster of poor cottages they placed their waggon-lines. But the batteries marched out almost immediately ... The preliminary bombardment had begun before the Australian artillery from the Somme arrived.*⁹³

On 22 July 1917, during the night, the 2nd Australian Division Artillery moved to the southernmost position to support the British 24th Division and form a field artillery group at Spoil Bank for the start of the 3rd battle of Ypres, also known as Passchendaele.⁹⁴

From 28 July 1917, preliminary action occurred and was described by Charles Bean:

*On the 28th, after several postponements, the counter-battery bombardment began. From now on the enemy was to be given no rest, and no chance of getting up ammunition, supplies, or reliefs without considerable loss. For three days and nights the howitzers, heavy and light, pounded the known German batteries ... In the 2nd Division's artillery, for example, all batteries opened with gas at midnight and continued steadily till 3:50, when all guns on the battlefield passed to the continuous twelve hours' task of covering the attack, and to the many calls certain to be made on them later. It was recognised that this must greatly strain the endurance of both artillerymen and guns.*⁹⁵

From 31 July 1917, the 3rd Battle of Ypres (also known as Passchendaele) began, ending months later on 10 November 1917.⁹⁶ Additionally on 31 July 1917, rain began and continued for 3 weeks. Drainage systems on the battlefield and in the region were destroyed by artillery bombardment, making progress through the mud extremely difficult as the water could not get away. Soldiers sank up to their waist in mud. Horses and vehicles were heavily bogged.⁹⁷

Also from 31 July 1917, Edgar visited the United Kingdom on leave, thus missing the first week of action in the Third Battle of Ypres. Edgar's service record does not indicate any previous leave.⁹⁸ Edgar almost certainly would have travelled to Burghclere, England, to meet his English-based family – his grandparents, blacksmith master Robert Sheerman and Harriet Sheerman nee Palmer, and his aunts,

uncles and cousins. He may have met his first cousin, Harry Sheerman – the son of his father's younger brother, blacksmith Daniel and his wife Minnie Sheerman nee Maskell – prior to his conscription required by the Military Service Act of 1916.⁹⁹ On 10 October 1918, Harry was on board the RMS Leinster when it was torpedoed and sunk by the German submarine UB-123 – just one month before the end of the First World War.¹⁰⁰ It is thought that Harry, Service Number 58181, was returning to England on leave – he was a private in the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry Cyclist Brigade, operating out of Dublin, Ireland. His body was not recovered. Harry was 18 years old.¹⁰¹

On 13 August 1917, after his leave in the United Kingdom, Edgar returned to the Western Front. At the time, the 2nd Australian Division battery position was north of Hill 60 and the artillery supply services were under strain.¹⁰² Hill 60, near the village of Dickebusch, is within the Ypres Salient in Belgium. Ground conditions remained challenging and according to Charles Bean, "One of the 2nd Division's guns was so bogged [in early August] that only one wheel could be seen above the mud".¹⁰³

From 20 to 22 September 1917, the 2nd Australian Division Artillery took part in the Battle of Menin Road.¹⁰⁴ A Sydney newspaper account described the offensive:

*On the morning of September 20, 1917, the First and Second Australian Divisions made the first attack on Passchendaele Ridge – it was known as the 'Menin-road stunt' – and both divisions came through victorious. They suffered severely, but although the Germans made repeated counter attacks to regain the lost territory, the Diggers fought them off ... The First Division made good headway ... The Second Division, which was entrusted with the capture of Polygon Wood, was also successful. During this period of the fighting the [opposition] was master of the air, and his planes were continually over our lines, bombing and observing ... The men were battle stained, fatigued and torn. Still they had gained a meritorious victory. In this battle for the ridge, the Australians and New Zealanders fought side by side for the first time in France, and the camaraderie of the troops was a deciding factor in the brilliant victories.*¹⁰⁵

Sometime during the 7-week August to September period after his return from the UK, Edgar was seriously wounded in action by a bomb.¹⁰⁶ Driver Tass Bland, in a letter home to his father dated 19 September 1917, described his own experiences, close to the time that Edgar was wounded:

*We have had a tough and strenuous time up to the present. Unfortunately, I am not allowed to divulge our whereabouts, except to say that our present situation is the hottest ever experienced on the Western Front. I think I told you that Fred and myself are with the 106th Howitzer Battery, and as it is a mobile one you can guess we get any amount of moving to new positions. It simply means that if anywhere on the front a battery or position wants strengthening, we are requisitioned for the job. The men are a very fine lot ... Practically the whole time we have been here has been a series of narrow escapes, either from dropping bombs, gas shells or "heavies" coming over and we all consider ourselves lucky to be alive.*¹⁰⁷

On 30 September 1917, Edgar's luck ran out – he was 22 years old. His final statement of service reveals that Edgar died of wounds from a bomb,¹⁰⁸ received in action in the field, Belgium.¹⁰⁹

A writer, 'Bombadier' from Mt. Lawley, Western Australia, summed up September 1917 in his 1933 reflection. "Menin Road, Hell-fire Corner, mustard gas, oozing mud, and sudden death – how the recollections of those crowded September hours are indelibly impressed on the memory! The stark horror of that ghastly salient can never be effaced."¹¹⁰

Edgar is buried at The Huts Cemetery, Dickebusch, 3 miles south-west of Ypres, West Flanders, Belgium,¹¹¹ in Plot 8, Row C, Grave 19.¹¹² He appeared in the 353rd list of Australian casualties.¹¹³ His name can be found on the Australian War Memorial Roll of Honour, Panel 14.¹¹⁴

In the Roll of Honour of his local newspaper, The Goulburn Evening Penny Post, Edgar was remembered with these words – "He rose responsive to his country's call, and gave for her his best,

his life, his all".¹¹⁵ Edgar's death notice in the Sydney Morning Herald reads, "Far away from those who loved him, In a hero's grave he lies."¹¹⁶

In 1922, Edgar was also remembered by his self-described 'comrade', W.J. Wilson, who worked with Edgar in his former employment at Kenmore Hospital – he published a notice in the local newspaper 5 years after Edgar was killed.¹¹⁷

In 1922, it was youngest son Frank's turn to leave home. He was one of the first intake of pupils at the newly established Yanco Agricultural High School in Leeton Shire, NSW, approximately 450 kilometres from home. By then, Frank's older brother, Sydney Albert, was preparing for a career in mental health.¹¹⁸ Frank's youngest sister, Gwen Rose, 3 years his junior, remained at home.

On 4 March 1922, not 2 weeks after the school opened, Frank's life was cut short¹¹⁹ in a fatal Saturday drowning accident in the Murrumbidgee River.^{120,121} Frank was 14 years old.¹²²

Three brothers left home, never to return. Percy, Edgar and Frank are memorialised on their parent's headstone beneath the Bhutan cypress trees at Christ Church Anglican Church graveyard in Bong Bong near Moss Vale, NSW. Their parents, Frederick and Emma Sherman, died within 2 weeks of each other in 1946.¹²³

From the time that he enlisted, Edgar served for 973 days or 2 years and 8 months. In a reflection, Captain Ellis wrote on the day of Germany's surrender:

*One's thoughts fly back over many months of gloom and anxiety to those days of March 1916, when the thousands of care-free young Australians assembled at Tel-el-Kebir and launched the [5th] Division on its proud and terrible journey into history.*¹²⁴

In a letter to the Minister of Defence dated 11 July 1915, Edgar's eldest sister, Nurse Sherman (Annie Winifred Lewis), requested information about the death of her brother, Percy, and her sentiment was equally fitting for Percy's younger brother, Edgar. At the close of the letter she wrote, "All we had we gave for the country".¹²⁵

Descendants of the Sherman family
hold the memories of their lost sons close to their hearts,
each generation passing the treasured stories of their lives to the next.

We will remember them.

In acknowledgment of the service of horses, donkeys and mules of the
First World War.

Written and researched by Amanda Jane Green nee Lewis, granddaughter of Annie Winifred Lewis nee Sherman,
the eldest sister of Edgar Robert Sheerman.
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Notes

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