

Second Lieutenant Robert William Hunter

Rod Martin



During the First World War, after news of a death reached the military authorities here in Australia, they had the habit of contacting a local minister of religion when possible, informing him of the details, and asking him to visit the bereaved family and break the sad news. Certainly, this saved them from the emotional duty of having to appear before the grieving relatives themselves. However, its proper purpose probably lay in the belief that a man of the church would be able to offer comfort and spiritual guidance where members of the military would be found wanting.

Nevertheless, it surely would have been an onerous task for Ascot Vale's local Presbyterian minister to visit the house at 263 Ascot Vale Road in May 1917 for he had to make two trips to report two deaths, one quickly after the other. The first involved Robert (Bob) Hunter, killed in action on St. George's Day, 23 April. The second concerned his older brother David, killed during the Second Battle of Bullecourt in early May. One would probably find it difficult to imagine the pain and grief suffered by that family. To lose not one but two sons and brothers within such a short space of time, when the shock of suffering the loss of one had barely had time to sink in before news of the second tragedy, would test the health and sanity of even the most dedicated patriot.

Bob Hunter enlisted five months after David. He was twenty years old, and may have felt the call to follow his older (and probably idolised) brother into battle. Both would have assumed that they would go to Gallipoli, and David did. By the time Bob reached Egypt, however, the troops had been withdrawn from the peninsula and returned to Egypt. The target then was the Western Front.

Bob was well prepared for the task. At 180 centimetres, he was tall for the time, and he weighed almost seventy-two kilos. He was an electrical engineer by trade, and had spent twelve months on active service at Queenscliff and also twelve months in 8 Engineers militia unit. He sounded like a good bet for an engineers' battalion. However, he obviously asked to join the infantry, because he was assigned to A Company of 37 Battalion. He trained at Seymour and, although only twenty, he was promoted to acting corporal on 7 January 1916. Two months later, he was promoted to sergeant, and he was then assigned to D Company. It is obvious that his leadership qualities had been recognised by his superiors very early in the piece.

Sergeant Hunter sailed with his battalion on 3 June that year, being transported on A34 HMAT *Persic*. The convoy went via the Cape of Good Hope to avoid German submarines in the Mediterranean, and finally arrived at Plymouth in early August. Once arrived, he stayed in England for about four months, attending a school at Hayling Island on 28 August (for what purpose we do not know), and then sailed for France on 22 November. 37 Battalion was a part of the recently formed 3 Australian Division, under the command of Major-General John Monash. After the shenanigans of some members of 1 and 2 Divisions in Egypt before they went to Gallipoli, and the poor quality of their training as shown up at Fromelles and Pozières in July 1916, the Hughes Labor government decided that 3 Division would provide an example to be followed by all other units. It stayed in England and trained intensively at Lark Hill on Salisbury Plain (the men of the unit becoming known, rather facetiously, as the Lark Hill Lancers, and being clearly identified because Monash would not allow them to wear their slouch hats with the brim up) before sailing for France and the Western Front in late November.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

HMAT *Persic* departing from Port Melbourne, 3 June 1916.

PB0827
(AWM PB0827)

Bob was no sooner there, however, when he was hospitalised with pneumonia. His condition must have been serious because he did not return to his unit until 20 February in the following year. It would appear that, no sooner did he recover from pneumonia when he contracted bronchitis, which also laid him low. By the time he did return to 37 Battalion, the Germans had rationalised their front in order to save manpower and had withdrawn to the heavily fortified Hindenburg Line. The Allies

had moved in to take the abandoned territory, and 37 Battalion had moved east, past the now infamous spot at Fromelles, and located itself at Chapelle d'Armentières. It was under bombardment from heavy trench mortars, 'pineapple' bombs (so called because of their shape), 77 centimetre shells, high explosive shells and shrapnel. What a welcome for Bob!



Captured German 77 cm. field gun (Dunedin District, New Zealand)
(Rod Martin)

In addition, the Germans staged a surprise assault on the twenty-third, some of the attackers reaching as far as the forward trenches at one point before being driven back. The Australians then conducted a retaliatory raid that night, following a heavy bombardment. However, the raid was basically unsuccessful, so a second raid was planned for the night of 27 February. That was much better. Seventeen prisoners were taken, along with a machine gun, searchlight and medical equipment. Two *minenwerfer* (heavy mortar) emplacements were destroyed and many Germans killed. the Australian casualties were described a 'slight'.



Hole near Ypres caused by a German shell or *minenwerfer* (AWM E00707)

37 Battalion moved into reserve at Bois Grenier on 7 March, undertaking training, resupplying and drilling until 5 April, when it headed, on foot, for Armentières. In

two days, the men marched sixty-seven kilometres in conditions described by the commander as 'extreme adverse' ones, 'owing to snowed-up roads.' Marching along with them was newly-promoted Second Lieutenant Robert Hunter. He received his officer's pip on 5 March while he was attending 3 Division's training school. He returned to 37 Battalion on 16 March, while it was in reserve. Once at Armentières, the unit stayed in reserve until it relieved 39 Battalion in the forward trenches on 16 April. German bombardments of the position were constant and, in the early hours of the morning on the twenty-third, the enemy carried out a raid on the front lines. Despite an intense barrage, no German soldiers reached the front lines. However, 37 Battalion suffered seven men killed and eighteen wounded. One officer was reported killed. His name was R.W. Hunter.

There are no Red Cross reports available on Bob's death, so we do not know exactly how he was killed. It was probably as a result of the murderous barrage. We do know, however, that his body was recovered and probably moved to the rear for burial.

Bob was buried in Cité Bonjean Military Cemetery at Armentières.



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

Sources

Australian War Memorial

Commonwealth War Graves Commission

National Archives of Australia

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