

Sergeant David Hunter

Rod Martin



Twenty-two year-old David Hunter joined up in the second rush to recruitment in mid-1915. False propaganda about the situation at Gallipoli, as well as a substantial recruitment drive by the government, led to many men deciding to enlist where previously they may have had some doubts. Perhaps David was one of these. A slightly built young man, David was 173 centimetres tall and weighed sixty-five kilos. He was a wool classer by trade and lived at 5 Derby Street, Kensington. His complexion was described as sallow, and he had dark brown hair and grey eyes. He already had military experience, being young enough to have served in the compulsory senior cadets while at school. After training at Broadmeadows, he and his fellow recruits who were assigned to 3 Reinforcements of 22 Infantry Battalion boarded A68 HMAT *Anchises* at Port Melbourne on 26 August and sailed for the Middle East.



HMAT *Anchises* at Port Melbourne in 1916

(AWM PB0095)

David arrived in Egypt, but did not stay long, being sent to Gallipoli on 25 October. As he went, he received a promotion to the rank of lance-corporal, so his leadership skills had been noted by his superiors very quickly.

By the time David arrived on the peninsula, the battle there had ground down to a stalemate. The last assault, by the Allies, had occurred in August and, apart from the capture of Lone Pine by the Australians, was a costly failure. Now both sides remained in their forward trenches, taking the occasional pot shot and throwing the occasional bomb. The Turks continued to bombard the men on the beach, and no place was safe at Anzac Cove. The chances were that if a sniper didn't get you, a shell, bomb or piece of shrapnel would.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL H14053
22 Battalion men resting on Brighton Beach,
Gallipoli (AWM H14053)

Winter was also coming, and the nights were bitterly cold.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL H14025
Snow in an Australian trench, Gallipoli
(AWM H14025)

The Allies evacuated the peninsula in December and David and his surviving comrades were back in Alexandria on 7 January 1916. He remained in 22 Battalion as it was halved and mixed with men from another battalion and new recruits. During this period, David was promoted to the rank of temporary corporal. Together, the men sailed for Marseilles in late March, part of 2 Division which, along with 1 Division, was the first Australian echelon to head for the Western Front in France.

The new arrivals were sent to a section of the front near Armentières. It was a relatively quiet area called 'the nursery sector'. The lack of heavy, concerted action there meant that the men could acclimatize themselves to the realities of modern industrial warfare without being placed in too much danger. However, it was the Western Front, and action occurred at every spot. The men entered the trenches for the first time on 13 April near Fleurbaix and three of them were wounded in the first twenty-four hours. The unit stayed there until 19 April, suffering a small number of other casualties caused by sniping and shell fire, before being relieved and going into reserve. When the battalion returned to the trenches later in the month it suffered its first fatal casualty on the twenty-seventh when a man was killed by a shell.

In May and June, 22 Battalion was based at Erquingham and Bois Grenier, taking its turn in the firing line and being subject to bombardments and gas attacks. David survived these actions, but he was unfortunate enough to lose his braces during some *melée* or other and was forced to request another pair. His pay account was debited ninepence half-penny as a consequence!



2 Division men in the trenches at Bois Grenier, June 1916 (AWM EZ0007)

The battalion certainly received a heavy baptism of fire during June. It was in the firing line from the twentieth to the thirtieth, facing a heavy German onslaught. As an example, on 22 June the commander reported:

Enemy's artillery active throughout day. hardly [sic] any period when his guns were silent. At 4 p.m. this sector was

subjected to a very severe artillery bombardment lasting 50 minutes from both light and heavy guns. Fire directed on Firing line, [?] line of Rue de Bois salient, support, Reserve Lines and Communication Trenches.

One can only guess at the stress such bombardments caused among the ranks.

The men stayed in reserve for the first ten days of July, moving around the area to different bivouac positions. On the tenth, they boarded trains for Breilly, on the Somme River. The greatest battle of the war had begun on the Somme at the start of the month, with the Allies attacking the German fortifications along an extensive front. Some territory had been gained, but at terrible human cost. The British Army alone had lost 60 000 casualties on the first day, 20 000 of them deaths. 2 Division had been earmarked to replace 1 Division after it had attacked the ruins of the village of Pozières, aiming to capture the strategic ridge behind it and thus open the way for an assault on the German stronghold of Thiepval. 1 Division attacked on 23 July and gained a foothold in the village. By the time it was relieved two days later, however, it had lost 5 285 casualties. 2 Division then took up the cudgels, aiming to take the windmill at Pozières.



The site of the windmill at Pozières

(AWM E00015)

However, before the assault began, David received a shrapnel wound in his neck on the twenty-seventh. The injury was classed as severe, and he was evacuated to England for treatment. He missed the assault, which began on 29 July and lasted until 4 August when the division finally took the ridge, after which it was relieved. It had suffered 6 846 casualties in the process.

David remained in hospital and then convalescence until 15 September, when he was granted a furlough of one month. He no doubt used this time to familiarise himself with the country and the attractions of London. He returned to France on 11 December, rejoining his unit on Christmas Day. It was the coldest winter in Europe

for forty years. However, having been at Gallipoli in its final days, David would have been no stranger to snow, ice, slush and half-frozen mud.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E00016

Australian soldiers at Montauban on the Somme, December 1916. They are cleaning mud from their boots and clothing. (AWM E00016)

Apart from the occasional bombardment, the biggest danger for men standing in half-frozen mud in the trenches was 'trench foot', an affliction that could lead to gangrene if not treated properly.

By December 1916, 2 Division had been involved in a second attempt to move forward at Pozières, aiming to take the strategic position at Mouquet Farm. It did reach the farm on 26 August, but could not hold it. It had suffered another 1 268 casualties before it was relieved.

By the time David returned to the front, the Battle of the Somme had petered out. Some territory had been taken, but there was no strategic breakthrough. With regard to Pozières, the whole affair had cost a total of 24 139 Australian casualties. The gain? The ruins of Pozières and the ridge behind it.

At Christmas, 22 Battalion was at Trones Wood, near Albert, north of the Somme, and in the firing line. Three days later it was relieved and went into reserve nearby. When David was in England, he had been demoted to the rank of lance-corporal because he was not on active service. Once back in France, however, it did not take him long to regain the rank of corporal, receiving it on 24 January 1917. Less than one month later, he was promoted to the rank of sergeant. By that time, the battalion was in the Le Sars sector, still near Albert, taking its turn in manning the front line,

and receiving casualties as a result. Good NCOs were in short supply, and David was promoted to replace a man who had either been killed, or wounded and evacuated.

When the winter finally ended, British Command looked to renewing the assault on the German lines. To save manpower, the Germans had staged a strategic retreat to the Hindenburg Line in January and February, leaving behind a swathe of territory to be occupied by the Allies. In early April, the British commanders ordered an attack near the town of Arras. It was also decided to launch an attack on the Hindenburg Line at a spot called Bullecourt, a few kilometres south of Arras. The idea was for the troops to break through at Bullecourt and then swing north to assist the troops at Arras.

That was the plan, anyway. The first attack at Bullecourt in April, using tanks instead of an artillery barrage, was a disaster. The tanks were quickly out of the action, no territory was gained, and 4 Division suffered 3 000 casualties, along with 1 300 taken prisoner. The impetuous General Sir Hubert Gough, in charge of the British 5 Army, decided to try again the next month, this time using 1 and 2 Australian Divisions. The attack was better planned, using an introductory artillery barrage, and a small part of the Hindenburg Line was breached and held. However, the troops could go no further. 2 Bullecourt and the attack at Arras achieved little, but again at great cost. The Australian casualty figure was around 7 000.

2 Bullecourt began on 3 May 1917. David, along with his comrades, 'hopped the bags' at 3.45 am under the cover of the artillery barrage and moved forward. The Germans replied with shells, shrapnel and machine guns. When a roll was able to be taken on 7 May, David was reported as being one of sixty-two men killed. Whether anyone else in the attack reported that he had seen him being killed we do not know. What we **do** know is that his body was never found. It may well have been obliterated by a shell explosion during the onslaught.

David was twenty-four years old when he died. Because his body was never found, his name was inscribed on the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial after the war.



Memorial to the missing at Bullecourt
(Courtesy of Ian Steer, Panoramio)

Sources

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Ian Steer, Panoramio

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