Sergeant Robert Curwen

Rod Martin

Robert Curwen was obviously a military adventurer. He spent eight years as a trooper in the British King's Own Hussars; he spent time as a seaman; he fought in the first battles between Australians and Germans in the First World War, and he fought (and was wounded) in the AIF in 1917-1918. After the war, he took up a soldier settlement grant and fought different battles - this time against the elements, poor access and poor quality land. Whether he succeeded in the latter ventures we do not know. However, in a letter to the base commander in 1923 regarding his medals, he claimed that he would 'rather be in France' than working 'hard at it' on his soldier's block.

We know little or nothing about Robert's early life. He was born in Fleetwood, Lancashire, in 1879. As noted above, before he came to Australia he was a hussar for eight years, and also served as a seaman for an unspecified period of time. He might best be described as a 'nuggety' man: 168 centimetres tall and 72 kilos in weight, with fair hair and blue eyes. By mid-1914 his address was Evans Street, Moonee Ponds and he was a leading seaman in the Royal Australian Naval Reserve (created in 1913). We know this because he volunteered for a little-known Australian organisation entitled the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force in August 1914. One of the first things the British government was determined to do after war broke out in August 1914 was to take control of German colonies that were scattered around the globe. A number were in New Guinea (the north-eastern section, then known as Kaiser Wilhelmsland) and nearby islands, such as Bougainville and the group of islands collectively known as The Bismarck Archipelago, the largest one being Neupommern (now New Britain). The British government asked Australia to take possession of these colonies. The AN and MEF was raised between 10 and 18 August. As a seaman, Robert was among the 500 naval reservists and ex-sailors who joined the force. There is something of a mystery as the lists of participants presented in the short history *How Australia took German New Guinea* by F.S. Burnell, do not

Militia and naval reserves leave Townsville for New Guinea, 8 August 1914, on A61 HMAT *Kanowna* (AWM P01411.002)

Members of the first infantry contingent leaving Sydney, 19 August 1914, on A35 HMAT *Berrima.*
(AWM A03272)

mention Robert's name in the naval section. However, he was listed in the initial announcement, published in the *Argus* newspaper on 14 September. A list of Victorian volunteers discovered by Lenore Frost was, for some reason or other, left out of Burnell's appendix.

Although short-lived (the eventually successful takeover lasted less than two months), the New Guinea expedition was significant in Australian military history. As Burnell puts it,

> For the first time, Australia was given work to do with her own men under her own officers, convoyed and helped by her own squadron [the Royal Australian Navy had been established in 1911]; and the expedition thus marks, we may hope, the definite coherence of six colonies into a nation which sooner or later will be able to accept the responsibility for maintaining Imperial interests in the Pacific.

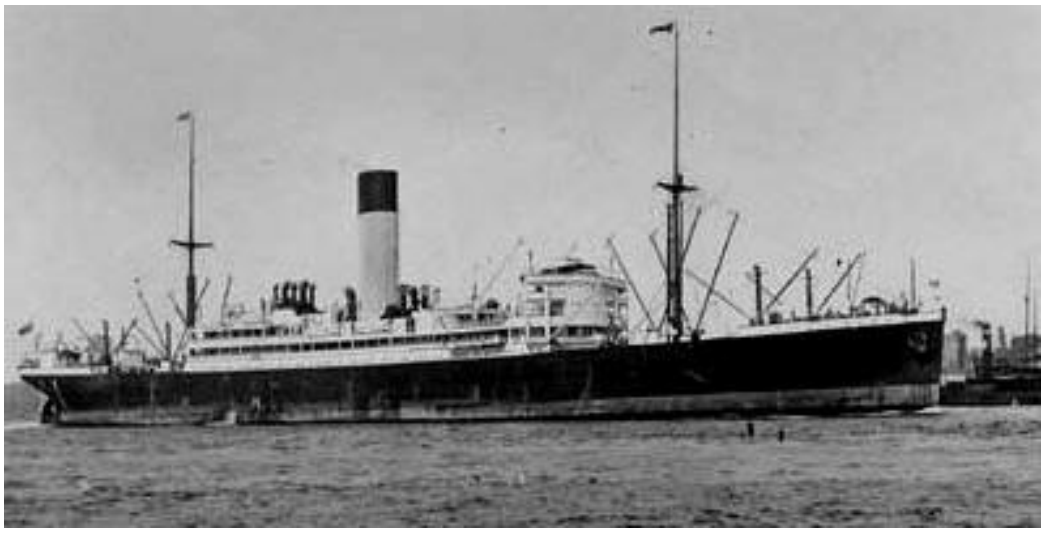
On his AIF attestation form, Robert stated that he spent seven months in the AN and MEF so we must assume that he took part in one or both of the actual short conflicts: the capture of the wireless station at Bita Paka, near Rabaul, on 11 September and the siege of Toma, in eastern Neupommern, from 14 to 17 September. The last remaining German stronghold, at Madang on the northern coast of Kaiser Wilhelmsland, surrendered without a fight in November. This marked the completion of the occupation, much of which had been achieved without effective opposition.
After spending those seven months in the force, and thus earning what was a somewhat jocular title of 'Coconut Lancer', Robert returned to Australia and enlisted

in the permanent forces on 20 October 1915. With his extensive military experience in England and Australia, he was appointed to the instructional staff at Royal Park soon after joining, and rose to the ranks of permanent sergeant and acting staff sergeant-major in the fifteen months he spent there. He must have been judged to be a very competent and experienced soldier.

As noted above, Robert joined the permanent forces in 1915. It may be that he regretted that move, because his skills were confined to the instructional school. It would seem that he wanted to fight because he was discharged on 15 February 1917, subsequent to him joining the AIF. Surely there can be no other explanation for this action. However, it may be that his intentions were initially frustrated, as he was assigned to the Service Corps rather than an infantry battalion and was based at . . . Royal Park! If this was so, then it took him four months before he could get his wish. On 30 July 1917 he was transferred to 25 Reinforcements of 8 Infantry Battalion and sent to Broadmeadows to do his basic training.

On 21 November 1917, Robert sailed in A71 HMAT *Nestor,* headed for Southampton via Taranto Naval Base in Italy.

(www.alh-research.tripod.com)



Jellalabad Barracks today (www.geograph.org.uk)

The men arrived in England between 5 and 9 January 1918. If it was Robert's aim to see action, then he was foiled again, because he was appointed to the drill school at Jellalabad Barracks in Taunton, Somerset. His reputation may well have preceded him! However, he finally got his wish at the start of April, when he was sent to Calais to join up with 8 Battalion, arriving a headquarters on the twenty-first of the month. At that time, all Allied forces in France were on the defensive. The Germans had begun their final, desperate offensive in March and, by mid-April, were still advancing towards Paris and the French coast, having recaptured all the territory lost during the Battle of the Somme (1916) and their strategic retreat to the Hindenburg line in early 1917. By 21 April, 8 Battalion had retreated to Hazebrouck in northern France. The men were based in a camp, but it was under constant bombardment from enemy guns and aircraft. The next day, the battalion moved into support lines just behind the front line, and came under increased attack. Many of the men were ordered to lay new barbed wire and repair damaged sections. This was very dangerous work, as it was carried out in No Man's Land, between the lines. Some were also involved in digging new trenches in which to hopefully hold off the German advance. It was in late April 1918 that Australian forces on the Somme were able to stabilise their position and begin counter-attacking the Germans. Perhaps the most famous battle at this time was at Villers-Bretonneux where, on 25 April, two Australian battalions were able to successfully counter-attack and recapture the village from the Germans after losing it a short while earlier. From this time on, the Germans were slowly pushed back to the point where the Allies began their own, eventually successful counter-attack, beginning with the Australian-American assault on the town of Hamel on 4 July.

By that date, however, Robert was out of the action. On 2 May, while operating near Strazeele, just east of Hazebrouck, Robert was wounded in the arm and hand, probably by a German shell. He was evacuated to a casualty clearing station, and thence to hospital in Guildford, England, on the sixth. He was discharged from that hospital on 27 May, but stayed in England until mid-October, probably convalescing. At one stage, he was in a military hospital in Fleetwood, Lancashire -the place of his birth. What a coincidence! By the time he did return to 8 Battalion, on 20 October, Australia's active role in the war was over. 8 Battalion's last attack occurred on the Somme in late August. The men were now in reserve and destined to remain so for the rest of the year. Robert's involvement in the action had been short, but he had a war wound to show for his troubles.

Ruins of Strazeele, April 1918 (AWM E02229A)

Robert remained with his battalion until 15 January 1919, when he went on leave in France. It was only a short break, however, and he returned to duty on the twenty-second of the month. In March he went to AIF Headquarters in London and stayed there for five days. His military skills were no doubt being put to good use. However, he had to think of his future once he was back in Australia and, on 27 March 1919, he went on leave, travelling to Falmer in eastern Sussex in order to learn how to garden.

Robert's leave was cancelled on 12 June, probably because he was scheduled to sail for Australia. He returned to London. and departed for home in July, arriving in Melbourne on 2 August.

Thanks to the research of Lenore Frost and Linda Barralough, we do know something about Robert's life after he returned to this country and was demobilised. He applied for and was granted a block of land in a soldier settlement district near Maffra in eastern Victoria. The Soldier Settlement Scheme was initiated during the war to provide ex-soldiers with a living once they had come home. Sadly, the scheme suffered from three major defects: the belief that anyone could become a farmer and make a success of it, the size of the blocks offered for sale or lease and the poor or marginal quality of much of the land that was granted. in late 1921, Robert and a Mr. Nightingale contacted the Maffra Shire Council to complain about another problem: that their properties had no accessible outlets. They had been using a route through another man's property, but they pointed out that permission to do that could be removed at any time. The only other way out was through eight chains (approximately 161 metres) of swamp, and the two men were asking the council to build a raised road through that area and thus give them the access they needed. One wonders what instructions were given to the people who surveyed this soldier settlement block (known as Mewburn Park) and drew up the farm boundaries. The result of the appeal is unknown.

Three months after Robert and Mr. Nightingale made their request, another report in the *Gippsland Times* indicated a more serious concern. After a long, dry spell, there had been a considerable fall in the prices offered for the ex-soldiers' produce (mainly dairy, grain crops such as barley, and sugar beet), and it came after the farmers had stocked up for summer. Therefore, they were not making enough money from sales to cover their outlay. The matter was deemed to be so serious that many of the farmers were reported as foreseeing a 'difficulty in carrying on.' A deputation's request to council was that the settlers be allowed to forego their rates for the coming year, as they would find it very difficult to pay them. The matter was left unresolved by the end of the council meeting, but sympathy for the settlers' plight was expressed, and one suggestion that the men build a road on which to cart their beets in lieu of paying their rates sounded promising. Was it going to be the road Robert had requested the previous October?

The same article also noted comments that the soldier settlers were doing reasonably well after their first year. However, there was a general decline after that time. A Victorian Royal Commission into the Soldier Settlement Scheme in 1925 noted the inherent problems mentioned above. The commissioners visited Mewburn Park during their travels, and a deputation to them indicated the following specific problems:

the settlers were not given sufficient acreages on which to make a living
the quality of the land they were originally given was poor.
the land was not worth what the soldiers paid for it
the land was unsuitable for intensive farming, contrary to what they had been told originally.

The commissioners left by the afternoon train.

The royal commission was very critical of the whole program. Its comments were supported by many of the settlers. However, it was perhaps too late to do anything about the problems. By 1934, only sixty-one per cent of the original settlers were still on their blocks. By 1939, sixty per cent had left the land. A similar scheme adopted after the Second World War attempted to take note of the royal commission's report. Blocks were larger and more carefully selected, and houses, roads and fences were provided for the prospective settlers.

We do not know what happened to Robert, whether he got the road he needed, whether he was driven from the land by the poor yields and prices, or whether he threw caution to the wind and headed back to France! Given his initiative during the war, one would hope that, a sadder but wiser man, he ventured into other schemes and made a success of them.

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