Sergeant Albert James Vick

Rod Martin

A tailor by trade and twenty-two years old, Kensington-born Albert Vick joined the AIF on 10 July 1915. He was one of a record 36 575 enlistments that month, a response to the continuing conflict at Gallipoli, a spirited recruiting campaign and the 'dastardly' German deed of sinking the liner *Lusitania* the previous April. It was a heady time, not to be repeated as the casualty lists from Gallipoli grew at an alarming rate. Within four months, the number of recruits was less than a third of that in August.

Albert was a wiry man, 175 centimetres tall and weighing around seventy-five kilos. Before he signed up, he had spent thirty months in 5 Australian Infantry Regiment, a part of the militia. He was assigned to the newly formed 29 Battalion, did his basic training at Seymour and was then deployed to the base camp at Broadmeadows. He must have stood out from his peers because he received a quick promotion to corporal only a month after joining up. He carried that rank when he and his compatriots embarked for Egypt on A11 HMAT *Ascanius,* arriving at Suez on 7 December 1915.

HMAT A*scanius* (Google Images)

By the time of Albert's arrival, the evacuation of Gallipoli was underway, so he was not involved in the battle at the Dardanelles. Instead, while training at the Australian base camp at Tel el Kebir, 29 Battalion was assigned the task of protecting the Suez Canal from possible attack by Turkish forces. This went on until June, when the men embarked for France as part of the first ANZAC force to go to the Western Front.

As part of 5 Australian Division, 29 Battalion was destined to participate in the 'blooding' of the Anzac forces at Fromelles, north of the Somme River. The greatest battle of the war had begun on the Somme on 1 July, British and French forces attacking together across a wide battlefront. At Fromelles on 19 July, in a feint designed to keep German forces in the area and prevent them from reinforcing their comrades on the Somme, Australian troops were expected to cross a shell-pocked and barbed wire-strewn area of No Man's Land and seize a German salient (protrusion in the defence line) known as the Sugar Loaf. In some cases, the distance from the Australian trenches to the Sugar Loaf was around four hundred metres – twice the distance calculated by British Command as being the maximum that troops could effectively cross and still remain a viable fighting force. The mastermind behind this scheme was General Sir Richard Haking – forever after known by the survivors as 'the Butcher'. Others officers were more realistic. Brigadier-General 'Pompey' Elliott, whose 15 Brigade would be involved in the attack, pleaded for it to be called off but was not heeded. After an ineffective and insufficient preliminary bombardment, the result of the attack was a slaughter. The amazing thing was that some men actually made it to the German lines, only to have to retreat when they were not reinforced. In one night, German machine and field guns caused 5 533 casualties, including more than 2 000 deaths. It was the largest single number of Australian casualties in one day of battle. Elliott was in tears as he greeted the survivors of 15 Brigade when they staggered back in the early morning light.

Fromelles, November 1916. Looking from the north-east corner of the Sugar Loaf towards the starting point for the 15 Brigade attack. (AWM E04030)

Somehow, Albert survived this bloody baptism of fire. Perhaps he and his battalion were lucky because they were required to hold the front line while others did the attacking. Some of those units were almost wiped out. A German counter-attack at 2 am saw the whole battalion engaged in fighting it off. Albert and the others continued to hold the front line during the time when the survivors returned and wounded and dead were brought in from No Man's Land. The battalion then stayed where it was, under constant German bombardment, until the end of the month. 5 Division as a whole was devastated. Even though it took a defensive position, 29 Battalion alone suffered 270 casualties, including sixty-six missing, between 19 and 31 July. The remainder of 5 Division was withdrawn and placed in less active locations after this time. Licking its wounds along with the other units, 29 Battalion played no major offensive role for the rest of the year.

It was probably because of the attrition at Fromelles that Albert received a promotion to lance-sergeant only four days after the battle. He then quickly became a temporary sergeant and finally an official one by 4 August.

29 Battalion was out of the action for the first two weeks of August, returning to the line near Fromelles on the sixteenth of the month. It then did regular tours of the front line, holding it and maintaining and reconstructing the trench system. This lasted until 21 September, when the battalion was relieved and conveyed to the rear. During this time, Albert and the others were able to enjoy such luxuries as hot baths – probably sorely needed after thirty-eight days straight in the front line, in the company of lice, fleas and rats!

29 Battalion men in the trenches, 1916 or 1917 (AWM H06134)

By the end of September, they were back in the front line near Houplines, just outside the town of Armentières, but the battalion was still undermanned to the tune of 328 men, such

was the effect of Fromelles and the Battle of the Somme (where Britain suffered 60 000 casualties on the first day alone, 20 000 of them deaths).

As the much-needed reinforcements slowly started to arrive, the battalion held the front line until the middle of October before being relieved and moving to Bussus. On 23 October, they returned to a very soggy front line at Flers. The fighting was pretty heavy during this time, the men at one stage having to get their water from shell holes as the supply line had been disrupted. The battalion suffered 'numerous' casualties while enduring constant rain and the consequentially muddy conditions – not to mention heavy German shelling!

Relieved again at the end of the month, the men went into reserve near Mametz. They moved around the area, resting, reequipping and retraining until 23 November, when they again went into action near Trones Wood, relieving 31 Battalion.

Trones Wood 1917 (AWM H08776)

That was the day when Albert died. He was killed by a shell, and reports indicated that he was 'blown to bits', nothing of him remaining that could be gathered and buried. It was that quick and final.

As Albert had no grave, his name was inscribed on the memorial at Villers-Bretonneux after the war (see below).

(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

Sources

Australian War Memorial
Cochrane, Peter: *Australians at war,* Sydney, ABC Books, 2001
En.wikipedia.org
Lindsay, Patrick: *Fromelles,* Melbourne, Hardie Grant Books, 2008
McMullin, Ross: *Pompey Elliott,* Melbourne, Scribe, 2008
National Archives of Australia
Travers, Richard: *Diggers in France: Australian soldiers on the Western Front,* Sydney, ABC Books, 2008