

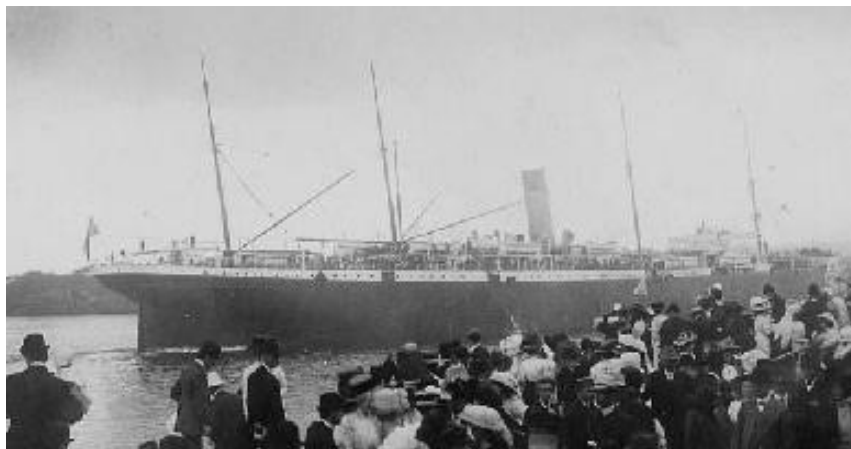
# Sapper John Turnbull Usher

Rod Martin



Born in Essendon nineteen years earlier, John Usher was working as a carpenter in Violet Town just before he enlisted on 20 November 1915. 162 centimetres tall, John weighed fifty-two kilos and had grey eyes and dark hair. He was assigned to 3 Reinforcements of 5 Field Company Engineers and thus received the rank of sapper. Later, in Egypt, he was transferred to 5 Pioneer Battalion and provided support to the troops of 5 Australian Division.

When John signed up, the conflict at Gallipoli was moving towards an ignominious end for the allied forces, and the evacuation of the peninsula had already been planned. High Command was now looking towards the Western Front in France, As a sapper, John would be needed to move ahead of the infantry forces to help in preparing the ground, and this is probably the reason why training in Australia was short and sweet for his unit and the men were loaded aboard A54 HMAT *Runic* on 20 January 1916.



HMAT *Runic*

(State Library of NSW, PXE 722/3502-3506)

John arrived in Egypt in February and underwent further training there at the Australian base at Tel el Kebir. He transferred to the Pioneers in May, a month before leaving for Marseilles and northern France in late June. The Pioneers carried out a wide range of

support activities including digging trenches (VERY hard work!) and building observation posts, tramways and tracks. They were also involved in carpentry, painting, sign writing, blacksmithing and the construction of armour. The men became very skilled in their jobs. However, like all roles at the front in wartime, pioneering was a dangerous activity, the men constantly subject to attack from snipers, artillery and aeroplanes.

5 Australian Division was slated to take the first Australian concerted action on the Western Front: a feint near the town of Fromelles, north of the Somme Valley in France, not far from the larger settlement of Fleurbaix. The major offensive on the Somme began on 1 July and British general Sir Richard Haking proposed the feint at Fromelles to distract the Germans and draw them away from the main battleground. 5 Pioneer Battalion was in position near Fleurbaix at the start of July and spent the next two weeks repairing trenches, digging in telephone cables, making trench mortar positions and constructing a light railway up to the firing line. On 15 July, heavy shelling and machine gun fire from the German lines stopped the men from working on the railway until it was dark. They recommenced their labours at midnight and finished the work at 3.30 am on the seventeenth. On 19 July the Australian artillery began firing at Fromelles to 'soften up' the enemy before the troops attacked in the early evening.

The attack at Fromelles was an unmitigated disaster. 5 Division suffered 5 553 casualties in that one night, thanks to poor organisation, inadequate resourcing, an inadequate barrage, and an almost impossible task: to attack a salient fortified with pillboxes and machine guns across some 400 metres of open land (twice the distance reckoned by the military as the maximum that could effectively be covered in an open assault). 15 Brigade commander Harold 'Pompey' Elliott predicted that it would be a disaster and tried to have the attack stopped. Sadly, he was ignored.



View from the German salient (the 'Sugar Loaf') looking towards the Australian lines, Fromelles 1918. Imagine attacking across that open land in the face of machine guns, barbed wire and shells.

(AWM E05795)

As the survivors staggered back in the early morning, Elliott was meeting them at the front line, his face awash with tears. Many of the dead were never recovered, and were buried by

the Germans in three mass graves behind their lines. Those graves have only recently been discovered.

5 Pioneer Battalion spent much of the day on 21 July cleaning up the battlefield, salvaging whatever it could and burying the dead who were found. The men looked unsuccessfully for wounded in the area that 14 Brigade crossed on its way to virtual oblivion. One of the pioneers was killed for his pains.



15 Brigade began its attack by moving across this orchard  
(AWM E03968)



The Diggers' Memorial at Fromelles, seen  
from the remains of one of the German  
'Sugar Loaf' pillboxes (John Philpott)

5 Pioneer Battalion remained in the area of Fromelles until the end of the month, and was in Fleurbaix on the twenty-ninth when the Germans bombarded the town all afternoon. The unit diary records that the second in command was severely wounded by shrapnel. The men also saw the church tower 'knocked to pieces' by a shell.



The ruins of Fleurbaix church

(AWM E03724)

John was probably there to witness the destruction, as he had been discharged from hospital after spending three days there suffering from rheumatism and endocarditis (inflammation of the inner lining of the heart chambers and valves) and was returned to his unit on 28 July. He was not with them for very long, however. On 3 August he was back in hospital in Calais and he was transferred to hospital in Epsom, England, two days later. He stayed there until the following month, and was then released and told to report to a depot at Perham Downs. When he arrived there he was granted furlough until the end of September. We can hope that he was able to make good use of this recuperative break because he was back in hospital in London on 10 October, this time 'seriously ill' with what was initially diagnosed as pneumonia. The diagnosis was wrong, however. He actually had cerebro-spinal meningitis, an often fatal illness that would have been difficult to diagnose in the days when lumbar punctures were still regarded as controversial procedures. Many of the symptoms are similar to those of influenza.

John died two days later and was buried in Tidworth Military Cemetery, Wiltshire.



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

He was twenty years old.

## Sources

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