

Second Lieutenant Vivian Gilbert Garner

Rod Martin

Twenty-four year-old railway clerk Viv Garner, a man described a ‘thick-set’ and ‘stocky’ by some who knew him, joined up on 1 October 1914 and was assigned to 14 Battalion, part of 4 Brigade led by Colonel John Monash. Despite having no previous military experience, Viv was appointed a corporal on enlistment, trained at Broadmeadows and embarked with the rest of 14 Battalion on A38 HMAT *Ulysses* on 22 December, headed for the Middle East.

The convoy arrived in Egypt on 31 January 1915, and the men began training in the desert. In April, they headed for the Dardanelles, and the first contingents went ashore at Gallipoli on the afternoon of the twenty-fifth. The troops having landed in the wrong spot, the scene on the beach was chaotic for the first few days. In front of them was a mass of almost impenetrable scrub-covered ridges and gullies. In what was a major achievement on the first day, considering the terrain and the fierce resistance put up by the Turks, the Anzac troops moved up the ridges and seized a number of knolls that they then called posts. Directly opposite each of them were Turkish positions. On 27 April 4 Brigade advanced up the appropriately named Shrapnel Valley and reinforced these posts. 14 Battalion took over the one called Quinn’s – the most forward of the Anzac positions, and only metres from the Turkish lines. Behind it was a sheer drop into the valley. The troops had to climb the cliff to the post during the night by hanging on a rope.



Quinn's Post, May 1915

(AWM A02009)

However, the position at Quinn's was shaky at best. From a number of positions nearby, the Turks were able to fire into the back of the post. The men could only be better protected if they took the so-called Baby 700 hill, whence the most accurate Turkish fire originated. An assault was planned for 2 May, preceded by a bombardment of the Turkish positions. Three brigades, two Australian – including 14 Battalion - and one New Zealand, would be involved in what Monash considered a half-baked scheme, given the distance of

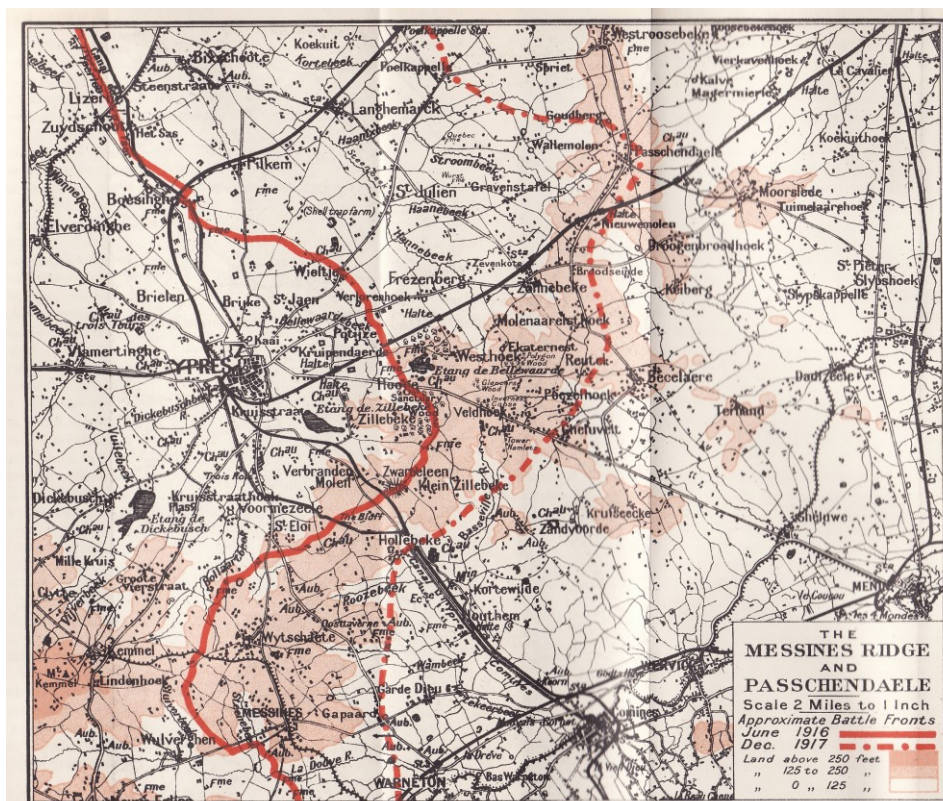
the target from Quinn's Post and the exhaustion of his men. The other Australian brigade was withdrawn after consideration of the difficulties, and the New Zealand one had not reached its positions in time for the start of the assault. However, Monash could not talk his divisional commander out of sending in 4 Brigade, so the men went into attack at 7.15 pm. They only reached a hundred metres ahead of the post before having to dig in. The Turkish resistance was fearful, and the hill too far away. After two days of trying to hold the trenches they had dug, the men finally returned to their original positions on the night of the third. One thousand casualties had been incurred and no ground won.

One of those casualties was Viv. He had been wounded in the right side and back, and he was evacuated to the beach and then carried to a hospital ship. His wound was evidently quite serious, for it was decided to take him to England for treatment. Six months later, while there, he was placed on the supernumerary list – usually reserved for soldiers who had been badly wounded and could not return to active service, but who could take up another type of role. Viv was attached to administrative headquarters in May 1916 after being promoted to the rank of sergeant in early February. In September that year, he was promoted to acting staff sergeant. In January 1917, he was enrolled at the officer cadet school in Oxford, and then promoted to second lieutenant in the following April.

It would seem that Viv had fully recovered and wanted to get back to the action. On 15 May, he sailed for France. He may have spent a short time training at the base at Etaples and then joined 14 Battalion at Doullieu, near Steenwerck in northern France. At that time, the battalion was resting and training in preparation for involvement in the Third Battle of Ypres, planned to begin the following month. It was well-known as 'Jacka's Mob' (after Lance-Corporal Albert Jacka won the first Australian Victoria Cross of the war at Gallipoli), it had already been well and truly blooded (and mauled) in such disasters as the Battles of Pozières and First Bullecourt, and its men were hardened by bitter experience. Viv, however, was a new chum, and he had to learn the realities of conflict on the Western Front very quickly. He had been at Gallipoli, but the conflict in France and Belgium was something else again. As British commander-in-chief Sir Douglas Haig put it to the Australian commander, Sir William Birdwood:

You're not fighting the Bashi-bazouks [Turks] now! This is a serious scientific war and you are up against the most scientific and military nation in Europe.

At the end of May, the battalion moved north into Belgium, and headed for the area near Messines, the planned starting point for Third Ypres. And what a start it was! At 3.10 am on 7 June, nineteen huge mines, buried far under the German positions on Messines Ridge, were detonated, the largest man-made explosion in history up to that time. Windows were rattled as far away as London. The Germans were caught completely by surprise and many were killed or injured. Allied troops moved in quickly and took the ridge. 14 Battalion advanced into the front line three days later, by which time the Germans had regrouped and were shelling the area quite heavily.



The battlefield of Third Ypres, 1917. Messines is located in the southern part of the map.
(Gibbs: *From Bapaume to Passchendaele*)

The first we hear of Viv on the Western Front is at 7 pm on 11 June, when he led one of two patrols out to reconnoitre Gapaard Road, just east of Messines (see map). The move was obviously dangerous, as the other patrol suffered two casualties in the process.

After establishing some posts in the Gapaard Road area, the battalion moved out of the front line on the twelfth, having lost five men killed and forty-five wounded. It then spent the rest of the month recuperating and training at Neuve Eglise before moving to Ploegsteert Wood (just outside Messines) on 29 June and again coming under attack.



Ploegsteert area in Belgian Flanders, 1917

(AWM H02096)

14 Battalion spent the first half of July in the trenches before moving away to regroup for the rest of the month at Neuve Eglise and Vieux Berquin. However, it was still very close to the front, and German shelling of its position occurred on occasions. The battalion remained in that area at the beginning of August and was actively involved in operations, digging or rebuilding trenches and manning listening posts. Sergeant Ted Rule writes in his memoir of 14 Battalion that Viv and his platoon had the worst post of the lot, being the most exposed to German shelling and raiding. He was having a real baptism of fire! The men were also reconnoitring the posts in the Gapaard Road area. It was planned to move the battalion forward to the outposts on the evening of 8 August and thus relieve 16 Battalion. At 3 am on the morning of the eighth, Viv, Ted Rule, two sergeants and a company runner were sent out to reconnoitre the outposts in preparation for the major move later that day. Later, most of the members of the patrol were able to provide reports of what happened and Ted Rule has devoted a chapter of his book to the incident. From all the accounts, it would appear that the following occurred: the patrol set out in very foggy conditions, led by Viv because he was familiar with the area, and looking for the outposts on the Gapaard Road. Because of the fog, the men lost their bearings for a while, were shot at, and went back to 16 Battalion headquarters to obtain a guide. As a result of all this, they arrived at the first post later than expected.



Observation post made of steel and disguised as a tree. Messines area, 1918.
(AWM E 04541)

As soon as they got there, they were fired upon by a German sniper, and hid in a shell hole. They had a choice of staying there for the whole day until the rest of the battalion came up, or making a run for it back to their lines before it got too light. They decided on the latter option and took off. When they arrived back at their company headquarters (an old German pill box) they found that Viv was missing. Ted Rule crept out in the direction whence they came and found Viv about seventy-five metres away. He had been shot through the back of the head and was dead. Rule retreated, leaving Viv's body there. That evening, as the battalion advanced, the men retrieved the body and buried it next to the headquarters. The next day, it was blown out by a shell and had to be reburied. A wooden cross was put above the grave.



Damaged German pill box, Messines June 1917.
(AWME 01487)

Being an active battle zone, however, the area was shelled again on a number of occasions, and Viv's grave was obliterated. His body was never seen again. As a result, his name was engraved on the Menin Gate Memorial in Ypres after the war as one of the more than six thousand Australian soldiers in the area who had no known graves.

Viv was well-liked by his comrades. In the Red Cross reports of his death, the men commented that he was 'well known and liked by all his comrades' and 'an original man'. Rules comments that 'the boys were closely attached to him' and that "he was not one to squib it; in fact, he was too much the other way.' As Rule writes, the men formed a very downcast party going back and Viv's platoon took it very badly.

The impact of Viv's death on his family would have been considerable. It was so considerable, perhaps, that it hastened the death of his widowed mother only four months later.



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