

# Private Robert Thomson Barbour

Rod Martin

We shall probably never know why thirty-seven year-old Robert Barbour of Ascot Vale enlisted on 1 February 1916. A traveller by trade, and a husband and father, Robert was unlikely to have received any of the white feathers that were being sent to civilian males at this time. They seemed to be generally aimed at younger, single men and many were probably sent by young women. Perhaps Robert felt that, with the numbers of casualties being reported in the papers, and the likelihood of Australian troops now being sent to the Western Front in France, he had to go and 'do his bit'. What his wife Flora thought of his action is unknown. It would be a good bet, however, that she tried to talk him out of it and viewed the future with trepidation.

If that were the case, then Robert obviously decided otherwise. He signed the papers, had his medical, and was assigned to 13 Reinforcements of 23 Battalion. He trained at Royal Park and Broadmeadows.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

DAX1456

13/23 Battalion on parade at Broadmeadows, 13 July 1916

(AWM DAX1456)

On 19 July 1916, 13 Reinforcements boarded A26 HMAT *Armada* at Port Melbourne, and sailed for Devonport in England.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

PB0112

Troops boarding HMAT *Armada*, Melbourne 1916 (AWM PB0112)



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P05194.017

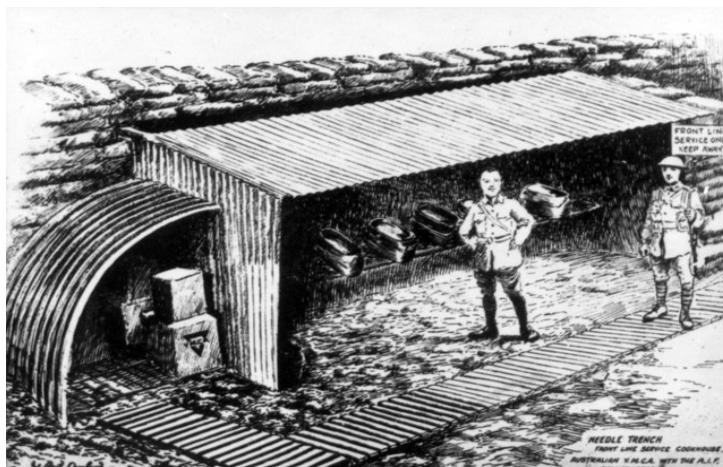
HMAT *Armadale* in 1915

(AWM P05194.017)

The troops arrived in England on 20 September, sailing via the Cape of Good Hope to avoid German submarines in the Mediterranean. They stayed in England until 19 November, when they were transported to the training camp at Etaples, near Boulogne in France. Two days later, Robert was awarded the acting rank of corporal. He held this position until 1 December, when the reinforcements were deployed to their battalion, and he reverted to the rank of private. He had obviously shown his superiors that he was leadership material, and he may have looked forward to moving up the ranks as the war took its toll of deaths and injuries.

By the time 13 Reinforcements joined up with 23 Battalion, it had just moved to Flesselles, north of Amiens on the River Somme. The Battle of the Somme, the largest battle of the war, had been going on since 1 July, and was petering out as what was to be the coldest winter of the war was setting in. The battalion had just gone into reserve and was down to 640 officers and men. The new arrivals on 2 December added 239 recruits to its ranks.

The battalion stayed in Flesselles until 17 December, when it headed for the front line at Needle Trench (near Le Transloy) on the Somme.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

H01129A

Cookhouse at Needle Trench, 1917

(AWM H01129A)

It went in to support the troops at Needle, Cow and Blighty Trenches on Boxing Day, the men building dugouts and a dressing station and laying duckboards and communication cables before moving into the front line themselves two days later. Their proximity to the action, reduced as it probably was by the winter weather, can be discerned by the fact that one man was wounded while engaged in the construction work. By 31 December, four more men had been wounded and two killed.

On 1 January 1917, 23 Battalion moved back to a camp at nearby Trones Wood to rest and recuperate. The men carried out fatigue (support) duties until the eighth, when they returned to the front line. For the following nine days they survived with no casualties. On 10 January, their last scheduled day before being relieved, they came under heavy shellfire and suffered three men killed and five wounded.



Trones Wood, 1917

(AWM H08776)

Robert was one of the dead. According to reports, he perished when a shell exploded near him, close to the company headquarters at Le Transloy. He was buried at that spot and a temporary wooden cross erected above his grave. It would appear that this cross was destroyed during later action, and his gravesite was lost. The sergeant who buried him and made the cross may well have been able to locate it again, but he himself was killed at a later time.

And so Robert's body lay undiscovered when the war ended. Thus began a continuing correspondence between members of his family and the war department that went on for more than fifteen years. His sister and brother asked for information about the location of his grave during the 1920s. The department could only give them details about his death and subsequent burial in the field. In the late 1920s it informed them that, should his grave not be found, his details would be inscribed on the soon to be built Villers-Bretonneux Memorial. In 1929, Robert's son went on a pilgrimage to the Western Front, but was unable to visit the spot where he was buried. To show its willingness to help, the department offered whatever support it could provide to him, including an itinerary that would presumably take him through the areas where his father fought.

Then, in 1932, Robert's remains were finally found. He was recognised by his identification disc, and the war department informed his family. The disc was sent to

his widow, the department believing it would be of value because of 'its former intimate association with [her] husband.'

Robert was finally laid to rest in Thiepval Anglo-French Cemetery, Authuille.



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

## Sources

Australian War Memorial

Commonwealth War Graves Commission

National Archives of Australia

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