Private Percy Charles Fallshaw

Rod Martin

A joiner by trade, Twenty-four year-old Percy Fallshaw from Ascot Vale enlisted in the Australian military forces on 20 January 1917. It was a time when the nation was crying out for fresh troops. The slaughter on the Western Front, in battles such as those at Fromelles and Pozières, had left large gaps in the AIF's ranks, and many Australian men were now unwilling to 'do their bit'. In late 1916, the first of what were to be two plebiscites on the issue of conscription was conducted by the Hughes Labor government. It was an issue that would split the nation. The majority of the people voted 'No', and prime minister Billy Hughes reluctantly accepted this decision – but was determined to try again (which he did a year later, with much the same result). So, for the time being, a small number of voluntary recruits would have to suffice to plug the gaps. It may be that Percy reacted to this need and, despite being married, decided to put his name forward in an effort to help.

At 180 centimetres, Percy was a reasonably tall man for his time. He was quite slight, however, weighing only sixty-four kilos. He completed a very short period of basic training and embarked on A70 HMAT *Ballarat* as a member of 7 Reinforcements, 39 Battalion on 19 February 1917.

HMAT *Ballarat* at Port Melbourne, 19 February 1917 (AWM PB0201)

The ship sailed via the Cape of Good Hope to avoid German submarines in the Mediterranean. However, on the second Anzac Day, 25 April, when nearing the south coast of England, the *Ballarat* was torpedoed anyway, and the troops had to be lifted off by some of the escort vessels. Percy's war record has him landing at Devonport, England, on the same day, so the port was near and the evacuation of the ship was very efficient. According to the Australian War Memorial, all 1752 soldiers and crew aboard were rescued. Attempts were made to tow the ship to shallow water, but it foundered and sank off The Lizard, Cornwall, the next day.

Crozier, Frank: The sinking of the *Ballarat,* 25 April 1917 (AWM ART 13329)

As part of Major-General John Monash's 'model' 3 Division, 39 Battalion did the majority of its training near Salisbury Plain. 7 Reinforcements practised there until 5 September, when they were transferred to France, joining their unit on the eighteenth of the month. At that time, the battalion was in Belgian Flanders. It had been well and truly blooded at the Battle of Messines in early June. Marching up to the front to be ready to attack, the unit had been decimated by a number of German gas barrages and only about one-third of the men actually participated in the successful assault. When Percy and his comrades joined the ranks in September, the battalion was assigned to participate in an attack on Broodseinde Ridge. Learning from the successful 'bite and hold' attacks at Menin Road and Polygon Wood, Monash and General Sir Herbert Plumer, commander of the British 2 Army (to which 3 Division was attached), orchestrated a very effective plan for the capture of the Broodseinde Ridge. In reserve at Zoteux, 39 Battalion received its orders on the twentieth of the month. On the twenty-fifth, the men commenced three days of solid marching, reaching Blairingham on 27 September after covering a distance of about twenty-six miles. The unit's commander noted that a number of the men fell out along the way, suffering from badly blistered feet. The battalion remained at rest at Winnezeele/Vlamertinge until 3 October, when it moved to nearby Potyze prior to going into attack.

The men 'hopped the bags' (to use the battalion commander's words) at 6 a.m. the next morning. The weather was fine, the ground reasonably firm (a relatively rare situation during what was the Third Battle of Ypres), and the battalion achieved all of its objectives by 8.30 a.m. The attack was an outstanding success and the road to the village called Passchendaele, the supreme target of the Third Battle of Ypres, appeared to be open.

Broodseinde Ridge, 5 October 1917. Men of 24 Battalion in a trench hastily dug the previous day after they captured the position. (AWM E00948)

But then the weather turned bad. By the time the battalion was ready to participate in the attack on Passchendaele, incessant rain had, once again during this battle, turned the ground into the gluey mud for which this part of Flanders was infamous. It 'ate up' many men and lots of materiel during the three major battles conducted there between 1914 and 1917. The battalion did manage to reach its starting off point reasonably well on 11 October, but many men were killed or injured on the way due to German barrages of gas and high explosive shells. When the first group attacked the next morning, they lost their officers very quickly and bunched up, in some cases behind deserted German pill-boxes. Machine gun and sniper fire prevented them from going any further, and they started to trickle back to the starting line. When they were relieved on the evening of 13 October, they had gained little or nothing. As the Battalion commander put it, the very cold and wet weather also taxed the men severely. Richard Travers concludes by saying that the attack proved 'a bridge too far, failing once again in the mud of Flanders.' There was one pyrrhic victory, in November 1917, when Canadian forces finally captured the ruined village of Passchendaele. By that time, the battle had all but fizzled out. The concentration now, once again, would be upon the conflict in France.

However, hostilities still went on in Flanders. Stragglers from the battle continued to arrive back at the battalion HQ even after it had moved back to Potyze. On the fifteenth, the unit returned to its training base at Zoteux. It stayed there until 10 November, when it was ordered to move to a chateau colloquially called Red Lodge, near Ploegsteert in southern Belgium. Action was still happening there, and the men were warned to take precautions to protect themselves from snipers and bombardments. When the battalion was located in the front line between 21 November and the end of the month, it lost five men killed and eleven wounded.

On the night of 30 November, eighty-two men and four officers conducted a raid on the enemy lines. Such raids were designed to check the state of the enemy and his trenches, cut barbed wire and hopefully capture some prisoners, from whom information could be gathered. The battalion commander noted that this raid was particularly successful ('considered the most successful of any in the division'),

resulting in the capture of two wounded prisoners, who provided a considerable amount of valuable information (one of these men was captured by my wife's great uncle, Private Percy Richards. He was awarded the Military Medal for his feat. Sadly, he was to die during a bombardment six days later). There was a price to pay, however. Lieutenant Ramsay, the officer in charge of the raid, was killed, along with four other men.

The battalion stayed in the same area, in and out of the front line through Christmas and the new year. It was now mid-winter, and the weather precluded any major operations. Instead, training and trench work ensued. However, there was also time for football matches, tugs of war, and even a moustache competition among the officers, judged by the battalion commander.

On 27 January 1918, the battalion moved to the Catacombs, tunnels dug into the banks near Ploegsteert, at a spot colloquially called Hyde Park Corner. These provided shelter for resting troops from bombardments and the weather. On 4 February, the men moved into the nearby front line. Two days later, an epidemic of influenza struck the unit headquarters: it was a portent of things to come. Raiding parties from both sides resumed their nocturnal activities. Of course, bombardment and counter-bombardment occurred at regular intervals, and enemy aircraft often proved a nuisance.

During February, Percy and the rest of 39 Battalion stayed in the area of Hyde Park Corner, moving between the front line and respite at Red Lodge.

An Australian cemetery on the Messines to Ploegsteert Road, near Hyde Park Corner (AWM H02094)

This pattern continued until the end of February. By the beginning of March, the men were in a camp in the Ploegsteert area. On the sixth, Percy was sent to hospital, suffering with the 'flu. Whether it was the Spanish 'Flu we do not know, but that disease was having a considerable impact by this time (and would go on to kill between fifty and 100 million across the world by 1920). However, as Percy was only in hospital for five days, it is unlikely that he had that particular strain.

On 4 March, the battalion had moved to a camp near Hazebrouck in northern France. It was still there when he returned, and stayed at that place until 26 March, when orders were received to transfer to Heilly, on the Somme. On 21 March, the Germans began their last great offensive, hoping to reach the coast, split the British and French Armies in two, and defeat each in turn – before American troops started arriving in large numbers. In a very short period of time during March and April, the Germans regaining all the territory lost when they staged a strategic retreat to their fortified Hindenburg Line in early 1917. At Heilly, 39 battalion initially acquitted itself well, destroying a German outpost, taking three prisoners and killing thirty-five, with the loss of only one man. As March moved into April, the men held the position they took up at Mericourt l'Abbé, standing in front of the important railway junction town of Amiens and keeping it out of the Germans' reach. However, the enemy attacks along the line were fierce, involving heavy gun and aerial bombardments. On 5 April, as an example, the barrage on nearby Buire and Treux was severe, causing many casualties amongst the battalion. However, as the commanding officer proudly reported, 'the line did not waver.' As an indication of the effects of the German attack, 39 Battalion had around 740 men when it was based at Red Lodge. By 12 April, the number was down to 640 (not including officers and non-commissioned officers).

The men were in and out of the front line during the month of April. On the twenty-first, the unit commander noted that, 'Towards evening the famous airman Capt. von Richtofen whilst following up one of our Artillery planes was shot down by an Artillery anti aircraft Lewis Gun.' This is evidence that, at the time it happened, there was little doubt that 'The Red Baron' was killed by a shot from the ground, rather than one from another aircraft.

On 24 May, 39 Battalion and others were subjected to a three-hour gas attack along the River Ancre, from Mericourt l'Abbé to Corbie. As the battalion commander noted, this was in conjunction with the German attack on the strategic village of Villers-Bretonneux, south of Corbie. The Germans captured the village but, thanks to as brilliant pincer movement organised by the commanders of 13 and 15 Brigades (the latter led by Pompey Elliott), it was recaptured overnight. As Travers puts it, after that, the Germans advanced not one pace. The end of the war was in sight.

39 Battalion held its line for the rest of the month and into May. The conflict was considerable, however, and casualties continued to be heavy At that time, the number of men declined to around 665, when the proper figure would have been between 900 and 1000. On 17 May, the brigade was inspected by British commander-in-chief Sir Douglas Haig. Brigadier Walter McNicol, the brigade commander, later told the men that Haig had 'expressed his surprise at the wonderful turnout and marching [by a unit that] had just gone thro' such hard fighting and Severe strain.' McNicol also reported that Haig was not satisfied with the situation until he knew that the Australians were in position at the head of the German advance.

And this was the situation at this time in 1918. The newly-formed Australian Corps, under the command of Lieutenant-General John Monash, had been so successful in its 'bite and hold' attacks that the men were now being used as shock troops. As Haig put it, he could trust the Australians to do what was needed because they followed orders. However, as we have just noted, casualties were high in consequence, and

continued to be so right through to the Australians' last action at Montbrehain in the first week of October.

For 39 Battalion, it was in reserve when the 'breakout' began with the Battle of Amiens on 8 August. That was the day that German general Erich Ludendorff described as the 'black day' for the German Army. Percy had gone to hospital on 11 June, suffering from Pyrexia, a complaint that caused the sufferer to develop a fever. He was there until he rejoined his battalion on 18 June, so he was able to take part in the unit's first major attack on the village of Proyart on 10 August. In a poorly planned assault, 39 Battalion (now down to 545 men) was bombed by enemy aircraft, causing many casualties, and then bombarded with gas and high explosive shells. These held up other advancing troops, and the men were blocked from moving forward. They then had to dig in where they stood.

A 12-inch railway gun supporting the Australians at Proyart, August 1918
(AWM E03826)

Proyart was eventually captured the next day, and the Allies marched forward. Although Percy and his comrades were not involved in any major actions for the rest of the month, attrition was still heavy as a result of bombardments and skirmishes. By 31 August the battalion's troop numbers were down to 433. On 12 September, Percy was granted leave in England, staying there until his return on the twenty-eighth of the month. Theoretically, he was just in time to participate in 3 and 5 Divisions' last battle of the war – an attack on the formidable defences of the Hindenburg Line at the Canal du Nord on 29 September. Travers tells us that it was a difficult battle, in which the Australians were forced to change their plans and improvise. However, they advanced sufficiently to lay open the way to a final attack on the line. 2 Division's attack at Montbrehain on 5 October contributed to the successful breaching of the last German fortification.

The war was over for the Australians. At the end of the last battle, 39 Division was down to 368 men. Percy, a survivor, stayed in France until 8 April the following year. When he returned to England, his battalion was disbanded, and he moved to an army service camp, where his skills as a joiner may have been very useful. On 16 April he

was granted leave with pay for four months to work at a joinery in Caversham, near Reading. This may have given him a chance to refresh his joinery skills before returning to Australia and it was probably part of a scheme to provide the soon to be demobilised soldiers with skills that they could use to gain employment once they returned home.

Percy sailed for Australia on 8 September 1919.

Percy in later life, making wheelchairs for disabled diggers (Lenore Frost)

Sources

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