

Private Leonard William McKay

Rod Martin



(AWM H06080)

July 1915 saw the enlistment of 36 575 men in the Australian Imperial Force. It was to be the record number of recruits during the First World War – up from an average of 8 000 over the first four months of that year. This rush to the recruiting stations occurred for a number of reasons. First, the sheer sense of patriotism and pride engendered by the attack at Gallipoli caused many young men to want to be involved. Secondly, this desire was heightened by a sense that things were going badly at Anzac Cove, and the men there needed more support. An active propaganda campaign by the federal government contributed to this mood.



(National Library of Australia)

Thirdly, international anger had increased when it was reported that a German submarine had sunk the British liner *Lusitania* off the coast of southern Ireland in April. Around 1 100 men, women and children had perished in the icy waters of the Atlantic and their deaths sparked outrage across the world. (Significantly, the newspapers did not report the facts that the ship was carrying war materiel and that the Germans had published a warning that they considered it a legitimate military target.).

Groom Len McKay was among the many that joined up at this time, enlisting on 12 July. He was twenty-one years old, 170 centimetres tall and weighed around seventy kilos. He had dark brown hair and blue-grey eyes. It is not certain if Len was new to the military game or not. On his attestation form, he stated that he had no previous military experience. However, the Australian War Memorial lists him as having served in 58 Infantry (militia) Battalion before war broke out. Whatever the real situation, he was assigned to 10 Reinforcements of 14 Battalion, trained at Broadmeadows and, with the rest of his compatriots, sailed for Egypt on A17 HMAT *Port Lincoln* on 16 October 1915

On arrival in Egypt, 10 Reinforcements joined the rump of 14 Battalion after it and others had returned from Gallipoli and been divided to create a new, enlarged Australian Imperial force. It was not long, however, before Len was in strife. On 27 January, he was hospitalized with gonorrhoea and dermatitis. It would appear that the fleshpots of Cairo were too much for him to resist! He stayed in hospital for fifty-two days, finally being released on 16 March. The following month, he was in strife of a different kind. He missed a reveille roll call while based at Serapeum. For that he was sentenced to seven days confined to camp. The punishment did not have its desired effect, however. On 13 May, he disobeyed a non-commissioned officer's instructions, and was confined to barracks for a further seven days. Len had not settled in well!

It may have been just as well for Len that 14 Battalion sailed for France on 1 June, arriving in Marseilles on the eighth. He now had the chance to regroup in a different environment and far more serious situation. The men travelled north in covered rail wagons and were assigned to the so-called 'nursery' sector, near Armentières. This was a relatively quiet part of the Western Front, and being based there allowed the men to acclimatize to the new and very frightening and dangerous conditions. Despite being 'quiet', however, the area could still be deadly, and the men faced regular threats from German bombardments (and some friendly fire, falling short), trench raids, snipers and aerial attack. They also carried out their own trench raids that month, killing some of the occupants and taking prisoners

It is possible that, while based at Armentières, Len was trained to be a machine gunner. There is mention of the letters 'm.g.' in his records. He would also be involved in attacks against enemy trenches, however, and he and his compatriots were destined to be involved in the major offensive for 1916 – in the Somme Valley – scheduled to begin at the start of July.

In terms of its location and timing, the Somme was more a political battle than a strategic one. No vital point or territory was involved. The French Army had been suffering tremendously as a result of the German attack on its fortress at Verdun in the southern part of the front. British commander-in-chief, Sir Douglas Haig, wanted to take some

pressure off the French as well as provide them with some moral support by starting a new offensive at the spot where British and French forces were side by side: the Somme. As it turned out, because of the massive French losses at Verdun, the Somme was primarily a British operation, and the AIF was heavily involved.

The attack on the Somme began on 1 July 1916. It was to be the bloodiest day in British military history. The British Army suffered 60 000 casualties on that first day, 20 000 of them deaths. 14 Battalion, by this time relocated to the Somme area, entered the fray the next day, carrying out a trench raid at Bois Grenier, north of the main battlefield. Richard Travers tells us that the raid, involving around sixty men, was designed to pin down German forces and thus prevent their removal to the main area of operations. Five members of the raiding party were killed and thirty-six wounded, in return for around fifty German casualties. However, as Travers comments, this was small beer compared to what was happening further south, and there is no evidence that it had the desired effect.

14 Battalion was not involved in a Major attack until it moved south to Pozières on 4 and 5 August. By that time, the men's compatriots in 8, 14 and 15 Brigades had been sacrificed to the mincing machine at Fromelles, north of the Somme. In yet another diversion, this time incredibly badly conceived and planned, the Australians suffered 5533 casualties in one night, and achieved nothing. Now 4 Brigade, including 14 Battalion, were to be thrown into another attack, this time designed to defend the shattered village of Pozières and the ridge beyond, both already captured by 2 Division at a cost of 6846 casualties. Supposedly, occupation of these areas would give them better access to the German stronghold of Mouquet Farm, the strategic village of Thiepval and, beyond that, the ultimate target of Bapaume.



Site of Pozières village 1916

(AWM EZ 0144)

When 14 Battalion arrived at Pozières and relieved 26 and 28 Battalions in the trenches, the Germans had been subjecting the Australians to a heavy and continuous bombardment for twelve days in an effort to drive them out of the village and off the

ridge. Despite this, Haig wanted to press on towards Mouquet Farm. Before that could be put into effect, however, the Germans staged a counter-attack on 7 August. In response, and under heavy bombardment, the Australians repelled the Germans and then made their own counter-attack, freeing some captured 48 Battalion men, killing or wounding an estimated 150 Germans and capturing about fifty prisoners.

Len was involved in the Australian counter-attack. According to his mate John Roberts, he and Len hopped out of the trenches together and charged forward. Suddenly, a shell exploded and Len was 'absolutely blown to pieces.' His sergeant-major wrote to his parents later, saying that he buried Len where he fell. If John's account is correct, there would not have been much to bury. Even if there was a grave with body parts in it, it was obliterated during the shelling and Len was officially listed as one of fifty-one battalion members killed or missing that day.



Pozières August 1916

(AWM EZ 0099)

As his body was never found, Len's name was inscribed on the Villers Bretonneux Memorial after the war, along with those of many of the 6 800 Australian soldiers who died on the Somme. The battle itself petered out in November as winter approached. The Allies held on to Pozières and the ridge, but the other targets of Mouquet Farm, Thiepval and Bapaume were never obtained. The Allies had suffered 410 000 casualties for the gain of a small piece of insignificant territory that made no difference to the strategic position on the Western Front..



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

Sources

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