

Private Joseph Arthur Yeates

Rod Martin



(AWM DA13115)

Twenty-two year-old Joe Yeates was a 'Fair Dinkum'. This meant that he enlisted in the army after July 1915, when the numbers of recruits dropped off sharply as a result of the increasingly bad news about Gallipoli and the concomitant numbers of women in mourning. However, Joe could have been a 'Dinkum Aussie' – one of the many men who joined up soon after the outbreak of war in August 1914. His attestation papers indicate that he did try to enlist earlier but was rejected because of problems with his eyesight. By September 1915, in response to the drop-off in numbers, the initially demanding recruiting criteria had been liberalised and he was accepted at his second attempt.

Joe lived in Puckle Street, Moonee Ponds, and was an engine driver by trade. He was a short man, 165 centimetres tall, and weighed just over sixty-three kilos. This did not stop him, however, from joining a unit that often performed very heavy work. He was initially assigned to 5 Infantry Battalion, training at Royal Park, Seymour and Broadmeadows, but transferred to 8 Reinforcements of 23 Battalion in December 1915. He sailed for the Middle East on A19 HMAT *Afric* on 5 January and arrived in Egypt in February.



Troops boarding HMAT *Afric* at Port Melbourne, June 1916. The ship was torpedoed in the English Channel the following year.

(AWM PB 0065)

Once in Egypt, Joe did some quick changes. First he was assigned to the newly created Camel Corps in March, destined to fight the Turks in the deserts of the Middle East. The change was short-lived, however. Later the same month, he transferred again, this time to 2 Pioneer Battalion. 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.

The infantry battalions in Egypt in 1916 were destined for the Western Front in Europe, and were scheduled to start arriving in June. The Pioneers, however, had to go ahead of them to prepare the ground, and Joe and his comrades sailed for Marseilles in late March. Once there, they entrained for the training base at Etaples, near Boulogne in the northern part of France. The next month, however, Joe's eyesight problems, possibly the reason for his transfer to a non-combatant role, recurred and he was hospitalised with cataracts, not returning to his battalion until the following June.

At the time that Joe returned, 2 Pioneer Battalion was at Bois Grenier, just south of the Belgian border. It had been building observation posts and machine gun nests along the front line. Later in the month, it moved north to Neuve Eglise in Belgium and was involved in building observation posts near Hill 63 in Flanders. These posts had to be in forward positions in order to provide information for gunners, so the job of constructing them was a dangerous one.



Pioneers building a communication trench, Flanders June 1916
(AWM EZ0005)

On 1 July, however, the major Allied offensive in the Somme Valley of France began, and 2 Pioneer Battalion began moving south on the sixth to provide support for the Australian assaults planned for later in the month. By 28 July the men were at Pozières. 1 Australian Division began its attack there on 23 July, attempting to capture the ruined village and the strategic ridge behind it. It suffered 5 285 casualties in two days. 2 Division took over on 25 July, finally capturing the ridge on 4 August. Some of the Pioneers actually took part in the attack on the twenty-eighth, manning Lewis guns in support of 20 Battalion. Others then began to dig new forward trenches, making barbed wire coils ready for deployment in no man's land, building roads and constructing bomb stores as well as dugouts for field kitchens. While this activity was going on, the battalion headquarters at nearby Contalmaison was heavily bombarded with gas shells on 30 July. The Germans obviously knew the value of the Pioneers!

Beginning on 7 August, the battalion withdrew to bivouac in the vicinity of Albert. It returned to Pozières on the twenty-third, constructing new roads with names such as Sydney, St. Kilda and Yarra Bend, as well as new trenches. The battalion diaries for September and October 1916 have been lost, but the one for November records the unit as still being in the Somme Valley, near the town of Longueval. The diary notes that the men were occupied in 'quarrying for ballast, laying track – carting and distributing material – bridging trenches and culverts – timbering box drains.' In addition, they were building a railway siding, constructing a tramline and repairing shell- and weather-damaged roads.

The end of 1916 saw 2 Pioneer Battalion still located on the Somme, doing much the same work as before.



2 Pioneer Battalion men buying chocolate from a French woman, the Somme, 1916 (AWM EZ0108)

In February 1917, the unit was still in the Somme Valley, based at Contalmaison. We must assume that it remained in the same area after Christmas and into the new year because the diary for January has also been lost. We know that it was near the town of Ribemont-sur-Ancre in the middle of the month because that is where Joe was wounded on the fourteenth. Red Cross reports indicate that he was involved in digging open a sap (a trench or tunnel dug to provide access to enemy trenches, possibly to undermine them) when he was wounded, probably by a shell. He was evidently quite sensible and recognised many of the men around him. When told that he was badly wounded, he replied, 'well I might now have the chance of seeing my brother in Blighty [England].' Joe's record indicates that he received a compound fracture of his left arm. Such an injury, while very painful, is not usually life-threatening, yet he died only two days later. It was far too soon for gangrene or blood poisoning to have set in and had a fatal effect, so it may be suspected that there was more to his injuries than was reported – that, or perhaps he died from complications on the operating table.

Joe was buried with military honours in Heilly Station Cemetery at Mericourt-L'Abbé.



1918

(AWM E02740)



Today

(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

Private Joseph Arthur Yeates died on his twenty-fourth birthday.

Sources

Australian War Memorial

En.wikipedia.org

Google Earth

National Archives of Australia

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