

Private John Mathew Farrell

Rod Martin

At 180 centimetres tall and seventy kilos in weight, John Farrell of Scotia Street, Moonee Ponds, would have stood out in a crowd in Australia in 1916, when the average male height was only around 165 centimetres. Perhaps some women noticed him as a result, and sent white feathers to his address. Their questions may well have been: 'Why are you still here?' 'Why have you not enlisted before now, when so many of our young men are paying the supreme price on the battlefields of the Western Front?' The white feather was the sign of cowardice. John may well have felt himself obliged to enlist if such things were sent to him.

There again, as a marine fireman, John may have been classified as having a reserved or essential occupation and not been allowed to enlist as a result. After all, shipping was vital to the security and survival of Australia during wartime. John may even have been a fireman on ships that took soldiers to the Middle East, and later to Britain. He may have decided that he had to enlist himself as a result. Alternatively, he may have signed up simply because the heavy casualty lists struck at his conscience. We do not know for sure. All we can say definitely is that, at the age of thirty-four and single, this man was free to enlist and did so in July 1916.

John was assigned to 3 Reinforcements, 3 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 being subject to attack from snipers, artillery and aeroplanes.

After seven weeks of basic training at Broadmeadows and Seymour, John and his compatriots embarked on A10 HMAT *Karoo* on 18 September.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

PB0514

Members of 3/3 Pioneer Battalion at Port Melbourne before boarding HMAT *Karoo*, 18 September 1916 (AWM PB0514)



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

PB0504

Karroo leaving Port Melbourne, 18 September 1916

(AWM PB0504)

The ship sailed via the Cape of Good Hope to avoid German submarines in the Mediterranean. The troops arrived in Plymouth on 15 November, and they then spent the next month and a half training on Salisbury Plain. On the last day of 1916, John and the others sailed to France and headed for further training at Etaples, near Boulogne. This camp was known for its brutality, especially the so-called 'bull ring', where the men were subjected to trench conditions - including live ammunition! They may well have breathed a sigh of relief when they joined 3 Pioneer Battalion on 3 March 1917.

At that time, the battalion was based in the Armentières section of the Western Front. The area was supposed to be the 'nursery sector' for newly arrived troops: a relatively quiet part of the front that would enable those troops to become acclimatised to the nature of modern industrial war without being in too much danger. However, the place was still deadly. In the process of doing jobs such as cleaning out, repairing and constructing trench drains, making heavy trench mortar emplacements and repairing, revetting and generally maintaining communications trenches, the men often came under fire. Two of them had been wounded for the month by the time John arrived, and a second lieutenant was killed the next day. All in all, another eight men were killed or wounded during the remainder of the month. One, another second lieutenant, disappeared while riding a bicycle on official business. Only the bicycle was found and identified.

The Pioneers were the general handymen of the military. They did a vast array of jobs, even mending the boots of infantrymen and repairing their clothes. The unit's war diary suggests that men with specialist qualifications such as boot mender and tailor were allocated to pioneer battalions upon enlistment. Perhaps Mathew was specifically allocated because of his job as a fireman. In fact, on 22 March, the battalion was required to extinguish a fire that had broken out in a cupola that was part of the headquarters billets (probably a chateau). John's skills may well have come in handy then. The fire was extinguished by 4 pm.

We know from the battalion's war diary that the men began moving north at the end of May to the Ploegsteert area of Belgian Flanders, not far from the town of Ypres. After the Battle of the Somme in France petered out in late 1916 with the onset of winter, the British commander-in-chief, Sir Douglas Haig, decided to concentrate his energies on the Ypres area with the hope of demoralising the German forces, driving them out of Belgium and capturing the enemy-held part of the Belgian coast and the important submarine pens located there. 3 Pioneer Battalion moved north to assist the forces gathering for the fray.

The Third Battle of Ypres, as it was officially designated, was scheduled to begin in June with the detonation of twenty huge mines that had been planted beneath the German-held Messines Ridge, near Ploegsteert. Up to 6 June, the battalion was engaged in the preparation of communication trenches, trench mortar emplacements, road repairs, deviation paths, bridges, ramps and water supplies. The Germans deduced from the military build-up in the area and an extensive Allied bombardment that a large-scale event was about to take place. As a result, they increased their bombardment of the area, especially around Ploegsteert Wood. Gas attacks were included. On the sixth, 3 Pioneers lost one man killed and seven wounded.. The mines were detonated at 3.10 am on the morning of 7 June. Approximately 400 000 kilograms of TNT exploded over a period of forty-five seconds, creating the until then largest man-made explosion in history. Perhaps 10 000 Germans died in the eruption, and 3 Australian Division (to which 3 Pioneer Battalion was attached) was able to rush the ridge and capture it in a single day. The Germans retreated to more defensible lines three days later and allowed the Allied forces to occupy their trenches. The Pioneers then moved in to complete such tasks as filling in holes and trenches, providing a regular water supply, clearing the Messines Road of timber and debris, and then reconnoitring the road, as well as providing Lewis light machine gunners for anti-aircraft defence. In addition, they extended tramway lines to the new front line. The tramways were important for the carrying of supplies, weapons and ammunition to the troops in the forward trenches. The work was carried out by a reduced number of men, however. During the attack, eight Pioneers were killed (four dying later of their wounds), and 102 were wounded. More were lost as the Germans continually bombarded the newly gained territory.

The Battle of Messines, a great set-piece victory, was over by 10 June. Unfortunately for the Allied cause, the rest of the Third Battle of Ypres was delayed until the end of July. In the meantime, the conflict settled down to a slow grind: periodic bombardments from both sides, machine gunning of the trenches, gas attacks, aerial bombing and machine-gunning, and sniping. The Pioneers were withdrawn and given a rest on 12 June, but were back in action by the sixteenth. They continued to work in the new area for the rest of the month and then into July and August. Things were much quieter after June, as indicated by the fact that the total casualties for August were only two men wounded.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

H16992

Two members of 3 Pioneers in a trench at Messines, July 1917. The man on the left was killed in April 1918. (AWM H16992)

3 Pioneer Battalion went into reserve on 31 August, staying at Wavrans until 26 September. While there, the men were involved in various forms of training as well as rest and recreation. They then headed back towards the trenches in the Ypres area, arriving there on the thirtieth of the month. By that time, Australian forces in the area had won two small-scale battles, at Menin Road and Polygon Wood, and were preparing for an attack on Broodseinde Ridge in early October. Once arrived, the Pioneers were immediately set to work on the construction of mule tracks, needed for the carrying of ammunition and food supplies to the front line. The work continued, leading up to the Broodseinde attack, planned for 4 October. When the attack did occur, the battalion's primary task was to maintain communication with the men at the front and, as the unit's war diary reports,

. . . much work was done in the construction of tracks to the new Front Line. 24 Lewis Gunners from this unit went over in the first wave of Infantry, attached to the 10th Bde., to prevent low flying hostile aeroplanes harassing our Front line and occupants.

The attack was a success, and 3 Pioneers were involved in the construction of mule tracks and artillery roads for the next several days. The diary tells us that the roads formed were principally made up from timber, fascines (cylindrical bundles of sticks or rods, bound together) and sandbags.

By 13 October, despite continual German bombardments and air attacks, 1 500 yards of road had been constructed. Work on the mule tracks was progressing and had reached Zonnebeke Station, north-east of Ypres. On the fifteenth, while working on a

road or a track, John was killed by a shell. Red Cross reports differ regarding the setting and sequence of events. This was not unusual, as they were gathered some time after the event, and the witnesses may well have seen a number of deaths and become confused as to exactly what happened to whom, when and where. One witness said John was known as 'Jack' to his mates. Another said that he was known as 'Jim'. Were they even talking about the same man? Private J.H. Farrelly remembered that John was building an artillery road close to Ypres. He reported that he was well-known and liked by his comrades. Private H. Gibson thought that John was involved in making a mule track and was killed instantly along with a Sergeant Hood and a lot of mules. He said that he saw the body later, 'most severely wounded all over.' Private J. Greenland noted that John was killed at a place called King's Dump, and was buried nearby the next night. John's military record states that he was buried in an 'isolated grave' one mile west of Zonnebeke .

John's grave survived the shelling that continued in the area for several months. After the war, his body was disinterred and reburied in the nearby Potijze Chateau Grounds Cemetery.



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

John's mother was granted a pension of £1. 15 shillings (\$3.50) per fortnight.

Sources

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