

Private James Thomas Roy Easton

Rod Martin

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.



1915 recruitment poster
(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.)

It was in this heady atmosphere that twenty-four year-old shipping clerk James Easton signed up on the sixth of the month. It may be that he tried to enlist when war broke out the previous year. If he did, however, his height – five feet four inches (160 centimetres) - would have disqualified him as the minimum requirement then was five feet **six** inches. At that time there were so many volunteers that the army could afford to be very choosy. By

June 1915 and the need for more men, the requirements concerning height and chest size had been reduced and James was then quite acceptable.

After spending some time in training at the depot battalion, James was assigned to 10 Reinforcements of 14 Battalion and sailed for the Middle East on A17 HMAT *Port Lincoln* on 16 October 1915. The next we hear of him is on 4 February 1916, when he was assigned to Moascar Camp, near Ismailia. After returning from Gallipoli the previous December, 14 Battalion was split and many of its experienced soldiers were attached to 46 Battalion. This action was part of an expansion and reorganization of the AIF. 10 Reinforcements stayed with the remainder of 14 Battalion and thus became part of a unit by then commonly known as 'Jacka's Mob', named after Lance-Corporal Albert Jacka, who won the first Australian Victoria Cross of the war at Gallipoli. The original members (including Jacka) and the new arrivals joined together at Moascar and then trained as a unit in the sands of Egypt.

On 1 June 1916, 14 Battalion sailed for Marseilles in southern France, its destination being the Western Front. Once arrived in the southern port on the seventh, the men entrained in covered goods wagons and travelled north to the so-called 'nursery sector' at Bailleul, near Armentières in northern France. The area acquired this title because it was a relatively quiet part of the front, and being located there allowed the freshly arrived troops to acclimatize themselves to the realities of trench warfare on a large and ferocious scale.



French countryside between Armentières and Bois Grenier
(AWM EZ 0172B)

On 18 June, the battalion marched to Fort Rompu, close to the front. While the men carried out further training there, platoons were rotated into the front line to acclimatize them to the real thing. On the twenty-eighth of the month, the men began moving to the firing line at nearby Bois Grenier and were shelled by the enemy the next day and night. One man was killed and several wounded as a result. Even though this was a 'quiet' part of the front, danger still lurked in the form of high explosive shells, machine gun rounds, aerial attack and snipers' bullets. The men had to be constantly on their guard.



Australian troops in the trenches at Bois Grenier, June 1916
(AWM EZ0007)



German aerial photograph of the trenches at Bois
Grenier, January 1916 (AWM A01590)

On 29 June, while bombardment and counter-bombardment continued along the line, a party of six officers and eighty-three other ranks moved out of the trenches and began training for a raid on the enemy's redoubt. James was in this group.

Intermittent shelling occurred during the next two days. At 11.45 pm on 1 July, the Allied guns and trench mortars began a bombardment designed to cut the enemy's barbed wire in preparation for the raid planned for the next day. Shelling from both sides continued on the second until just before 11.30 pm, the time decided upon for the start of the raid. At 11.38 pm the raiding party, hitherto hidden in no man's land during the final Allied bombardment, moved forward. Despite two heavy bombardments aimed at the enemy's wire, the party found it uncut, and had to spend time breaking through. The men finally

reached the Germans' front trench and entered it, throwing grenades and causing around twenty-five casualties. They then withdrew under machine gun fire. Thirty-eight soldiers had been wounded and nine were missing.

Such night time raids were often carried out in efforts to capture enemy soldiers, who could then be interrogated about their side's placements and dispositions. Intelligence officers would then attempt to piece together some idea of the strength and quality of the opposition. There is no report in the unit diary, however, to indicate that this particular party was successful in this instance. No soldiers were captured, and no territory taken. It could be said, therefore, that the raid on 2 July was a costly failure – one of many during this long war.

And it was a failure for which James Easton gave his life. He was one of the wounded, being hit in both the abdomen and the arm. He was carried back to the Australian trenches and evacuated to a casualty clearing station behind the lines. He died there two days later.

James was buried with military honours in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension (Nord). He was twenty-five years old. The following month, many of his compatriots in 14 Battalion were killed at the Battle of Pozières. It represented the largest single loss of life of any Australian army in any conflict.



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

Sources

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