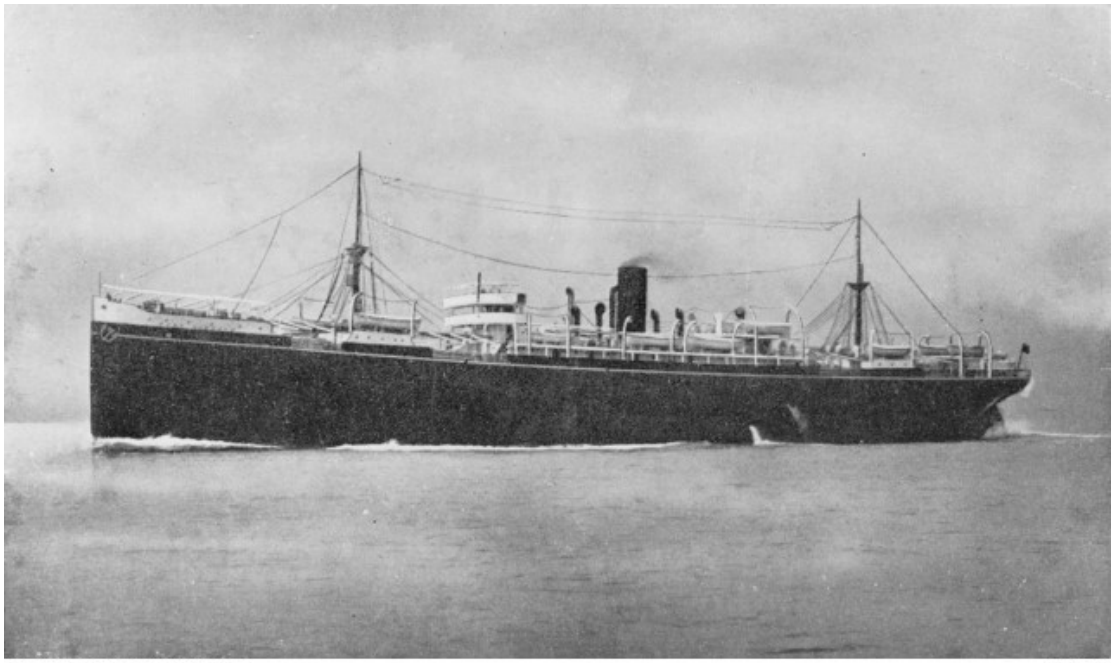
Private George William Fanner

Rod Martin

The disastrous experiences of the Anzacs at Gallipoli in 1915, and then in France in 1916, caused the commander of 1 Anzac Corps, Sir William Birdwood, to comment that, having just formed the new 3 Australian Division by special order, the Australian government had to take a special interest in it. Birdwood noted that a main reason for the heavy losses in battles such as Fromelles and Pozières was the fact that 4 and 5 Divisions had been 'forged out of half-veteran material in the dust and sweat of Egypt and then flung into battle like a learner of swimming thrown into deep water.' To avoid such a situation in the future, he recommended that the new recruits should undergo intensive training, first here in Australia and then in England, before transferring to the Western Front. Command of this new division and approach was awarded to Major-General John Monash.

One of the new units created for this division was 37 Battalion. It was formed in February 1916 at Seymour and, on 26 May that year, twenty-five year-old married plasterer George Fanner enlisted and was assigned to 4 Reinforcements. He was sent to Seymour to undertake training and, on 20 October, he and the rest of the battalion sailed for Europe on A17 HMAT *Port Lincoln.*



(AWM H15982)

By late 1916, convoys of troops from the Antipodes were sailing via the Cape of Good Hope in order to avoid hostilities in the Mediterranean. The ship then sailed north along the African coast to Sierra Leone. There the men transferred to another transport (A30 HMAT *Borda*) and continued their journey to Plymouth, on the southern coast of England, arriving on 9 January 1917.

The new recruits were sent to Lark Hill, not far from Salisbury Plain, for intensive training lasting two and as half months. Their trainers were men who had survived

the Western Front. In Charles Bean's words, the men of 3 Division were treated with kid gloves by the military. As a result, when they got to France in April 1917, they were referred to derisively by the men of other divisions as the 'neutrals', the 'Lark Hill Lancers' or, most generally, as the Eggs-a-cook', (Egyptian sellers' description of their items for sale) on account of their oval shoulder patches. If the patches did not identify them, then their slouch hats did. Monash insisted that they should wear them with the brim down to distinguish them from other troops. The men themselves did not like that. They wanted to fit in with all the others, not be made to look different.

37 Battalion's shoulder patch (AWM RELAWM13307.095)

4 Reinforcements of 37 Battalion sailed to France on 20 March 1917 and were then conveyed to the section of the Western Front near the town of Armentières. The original members of the battalion had been located there since arriving in France the previous November. The area near Armentières was referred to as the 'nursery sector' because it was a relatively quiet part of the front that allowed new arrivals to acclimatise themselves to the realities of modern industrial warfare without being placed in too much danger. Everything is relative, however. There were still Germans in the opposing trenches and they still fired their rifles and shells at their enemies. The battalion had first gone into action on 16 December. By the end of the following January, fifteen of its men had been killed and twenty-two wounded.

By the time 4 Reinforcements joined the rest of 37 Battalion, it was in reserve at La Creche, near the village of Bois-Grenier, south-west of Armentières. It returned to that town on 6 April and relieved 39 Battalion in the trenches on the sixteenth. The Germans bombarded the trenches heavily the next day, using lots of so-called 'pineapple bombs'. These were types of grenades, having fins, and they were fired after being inserted into the soil.

A pineapple bomb found on the Australian seabed in 2015 (Western Australian Police photo)

A box of pineapple bombs found in a captured trench. Note the three set up, ready to fire. (AWM P02321.060)

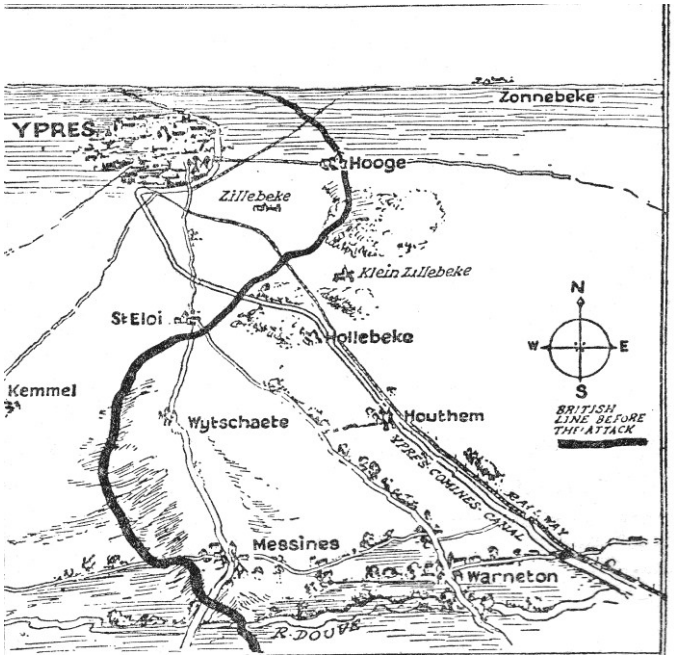
There was plenty of action in the German trenches before the battalion was relieved on Anzac Day, but an anticipated raid by the enemy did not eventuate.

After being relieved, the men headed north into Belgium, arriving at the town of Ploegsteert, south of Ypres, on the twenty-seventh of April. They were then billeted in one of the specially created tunnels there, number sixty-three. Talk among the officers at Ploegsteert was about the coming *Magnum Opus.* The British plan was to begin what became the Third Battle of Ypres with the explosion of twenty huge

mines, secretly laid underneath the German trenches near the town of Messines. The Australian feature film *Beneath Hill 60* recounts the story of the placing and detonation of one of these mines by Australian engineers. The belief was that detonation of the mines would destroy the German defences at Messines, and many Germans along with them, and allow the Allies to take the town. This would be the first act of the major battle to come – one that has often been described using the name of its eventual destination – Passchendaele.

37 Battalion had relieved 39 Battalion in the trenches on 13 May, and was involved in quite a lot of action, including an unsuccessful night time raid on the German trenches on the twentieth. Fortunately, there were no casualties. The men were relieved on the twenty-third of the month, but were destined to participate in another raid, planned for the night of 31 May. This subsequently took place, but without yielding any real success. One man was wounded.

Early June saw the battalion preparing for the coming offensive in earnest. The intention of the British commander-in-chief, Sir Douglas Haig, was to turn the German flank from the Ypres salient, occupy the Belgian coast and capture the German submarine pens at Ostend and Zeebrugge. He argued that such a move would place enormous pressure on the Germans, who would be forced to transfer extra forces to the Ypres area to avoid losing the territory, thus taking pressure off the beleaguered French Army further south, which was suffering mutinies because of massive losses. In addition ,capturing the submarine pens would remove much of the threat to allied convoys in the Atlantic, involved in transporting troops, equipment and food from North America. Haig also argued that success at Ypres would devastate German morale and could lead to the collapse of their army. Some cynical historians, however, have suggested that these were not Haig's real intentions at all. Instead, they argue, he was concerned about losing his pre-eminence once American troops arrived at the front in large numbers (America had entered the war the previous April) and his significance because a loss in Belgium was likely to lead to British prime minister David Lloyd George shifting the focus of British operations to the Italian Front.



(Gibbs: *From Bapaume to Passchendaele 1917*)

Whatever the truth of the matter, it was of no significance to George and his compatriots. They were focused on the coming attack at Messines. At 3.10 in the morning on 7 June, nineteen of the mines were detonated, destroying Messines Ridge and killing up to 10 000 Germans immediately. Comprising 400 000 kilograms of TNT, detonated over a period of forty-five seconds, it was the largest man-made explosion in history up to that time, and could be heard as far away as London. Soon after the explosions, the men of 3 Division, 37 Battalion included, attacked across No Man's Land and overwhelmed the surviving Germans, capturing Messines Ridge in a single day. All objectives were achieved and Messines was recorded as one of the great set-piece victories of the war. However, a bitter price had been paid for the three kilometres of territory that had been gained: 6 800 casualties. Fortunately for him, George was not among them.

37 Battalion was relieved on 9 June and went into reserve. However, the men were still in danger. The Germans shelled one of their camps heavily and enemy aircraft shot down two of their observation balloons. The same thing happened at the next camp the battalion moved to. On the twenty-fourth they moved again, this time to safer environs, and commenced an eighteen-day training course.

On 11 July, the men moved back to the front line area near Messines and took up positions there. Despite the devastation wrought by the mines the previous month, the Germans had re-established themselves in the area, and they began shelling the lines quite heavily on the thirteenth. By the fifteenth, the battalion had suffered eleven casualties as a result. Some of these may have been caused by poison gas, as the Germans had been using gas shells as part of their bombardment, particularly at night. Perhaps this was done so that the troops could not see the clouds of gas before they hit them.

A portion of the Messines battlefield in November 1917. The ruins of the village can be seen in the background. (AWM E01293)

On the night of 20 July, the battalion was again relieved and withdrew to a nearby location called Irish Farm. On that day, George was promoted to lance-corporal, so

his performance up until that time must have been noteworthy. However, the promotion was obviously not for him (did his mates rib him about it?) as he requested a reversion to the rank of private only eleven days later.

By this time, the men may have begun to wonder why the Third Battle of Ypres, of which the Messines attack was the first stage, had not commenced in earnest. In fact, The second stage did not begin until 31 July. The Battle of Passchendaele was a disaster for the British. The successful attack at Messines had warned the Germans that a major offensive at Ypres was imminent, and they reinforced their lines accordingly. And so tardy was the main attack after Messines that they had over a month in which to do it. With nearly a million men on each side, and with the Germans entrenched in their heavily fortified Hindenburg Line, Haig had neither a strategic nor a numerical advantage on the Ypres Front. When the first troops went over the tops of the trenches on 31 July, they would do so against the best advice of military and political planners. One of the biggest problems they would face would be mud, "gluey, intolerable mud", as Leon Wolff describes it. The ground at Ypres is heavy clay. Water never drains away naturally. What is more, continual bombardments since 1914 had churned up the ground and destroyed the delicate drainage system that had been constructed by farmers many centuries before to make the area arable. When combined with rain, the new preliminary bombardment in 1917 would turn this ground into almost impassable mud. And rain it certainly did, causing British prime minister David Lloyd George to christen the conflict 'the battle of the mud'.

On the first day of the attack, 37 Battalion was fulfilling the duty of support battalion to 11 Brigade, taking responsibility for captured enemy soldiers. Its turn in combat was not to come until September. In the meantime, for much of the month of August and more than half of September, the battalion stayed in reserve a Blequin in France. On Monash's instigation, the men were even taken to Tardinghen, on the coast north of Boulogne, on 18 September for them to have an enjoyable day on the beach. However, many of them probably guessed that some hard combat was coming up. There's no such thing as a free lunch!

And those possessing such perspicacity were not to be disappointed. By 26 August, it had been decided that I Anzac Corps would soon relieve a British corps on the battlefield, and II Anzac Corps (to which George's 3 Division belonged) would come in at a later stage, possibly to I Anzac's left. I Anzac marched north to do this and entered the front line near Westhoek and Glencorse Wood on 16 September. They went into attack on 20 September in heavy mud after overnight rain. Les Carlyon writes that many of them were wet from the waist down and carrying several pounds of mud on each boot (as well as their sixty-pound packs) as they assembled for the jump-off. Despite these handicaps, the troops gained a limited victory in what became known as the Battle of Menin Road. They advanced about 1 200 metres, but at the cost of 5 000 casualties. The total gain in territory as a result of this battle was about nine square kilometres. As Carlyon points out, it was hardly going to win the war.

Haig, however, was delighted, and he was encouraged to move on and try to take Polygon Wood and Passchendaele Ridge. The attack at Polygon Wood, which began on 26 September and again featured I Anzac Corps, was also judged a success, with five and a half square kilometres of territory taken – but again at enormous human cost. There were 5 400 Australian casualties alone. As Carlyon puts it, "In a week, in

two short and ‘successful’ battles, the Australians had lost 10, 000 men to advance the allied line in Belgium a few thousand yards”.

After Polygon Wood, 4 and 5 Australian Divisions left the front line, and were replaced by 1, 2 and 3 Divisions, each of which moved north for the next step in the advance on Passchendaele. This would be the Battle of Broodseinde. According to Bean, this third step in the offensive was the most important. The objective was the section of the main ridge known as the ‘Broodseinde Ridge’. Since its abandonment by the British during the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915, this ridge had formed the main buttress of the German position in the area. From it, the Germans were able to look out on the British front in practically all directions. Capture this ridge, the allied planners believed, and their troops could sweep across it to Passchendaele. II Anzac Corps would be at the forefront, capturing the most strategic part of the ridge and then playing the chief part by extending the capture of the ridge to beyond Passchendaele. 3 Division would lead the attack towards Broodseinde village.

Australian troops during the battle of Broodseinde 4 October 1917 (AWM E01051)

Two days before the attack, George and his compatriots in 37 Battalion arrived in Ypres. They marched through the ruined town and bivouacked near the now famous Menin Gate.

3 Division troops moving through Ypres October 1917 (AWM C00447)

Zero hour was at 6.00 am on the fourth. There was some haste involved as autumn was advancing, and the chances of the weather deteriorating were increasing every day. The chief danger at Broodseinde, according to Bean, was the chance of a break in the weather. Up until 2 October, George and 3 Division had been plagued by dust clouds as they moved into position. With exquisite timing, however, the rain started setting in for winter on the third, just before the initial attack was to go ahead. It was a steady, cold rain, accompanied by icy winds. For the men of 3 Division, the attack took place on a very narrow front near Zonnebeke. Many of them found that they had to cross a veritable bog, as most of the existent tracks in the area had been destroyed by the preliminary bombardment. They moved on, however, against fierce German resistance and bombardment, and achieved their initial objective. The attack was, says Bean, "an overwhelming success". To put this success into perspective, however, we need to remember that the Australian forces had advanced less than two kilometres, and had lost 6 432 men in the process. By the end of October, 37 Battalion had suffered eighty-seven men killed, 345 wounded, thirty-three missing and seventeen died of wounds. It was an expensive victory.

After another, brief attack on 12 October, 37 Battalion was taken out of the line on the fifteenth and sent back to Blequin to rest. Although their success was limited in scope, the skill and bravery of the men of 3 Division should not be understated. As Bean notes,

> . . . among many well-informed observers at the front . . . there was a definite feeling that this battle was the most complete success so far won by the British Army in France. . . for the first time in years, at noon on October 4th on the heights east of Ypres, British troops on the Western Front stood face to face with the possibility of decisive success.

Referring specifically to the men, the battalion commander wrote:

> 'Tis after the battle that the sense of pride most strongly asserts itself and now was here this body of men – haughty in the extreme – needing no thanks, no special commendation from the world but perfectly content to retain their self satisfaction as their only reward for the glorious deeds they had achieved.

37 Battalion stayed in training for the rest of the month and then until 10 November, when it began moving south, back into France. By the twelfth the men were in the vicinity of Hazebrouck, west of Armentières, and they entered the front line there the next day. Their orders were to act defensively. Winter was, by now, in full swing and some of the trenches were incomplete and knee-deep in slush. The men were relieved on 21 December, having suffered two wounded by German trench mortar fire. George and his compatriots moved a short distance away from the front line and were then occupied during the night time in carrying material for the pioneer battalion that was working at improving the trenches. On the twenty-ninth they were back in the front line themselves. Three men were killed and one wounded by a barrage on the second-last day of the year.

In the latter months of 1917 George had committed a couple of minor indiscretions. On 14 September, he received four days confined to barracks for not carrying a

helmet. On 29 November, and a little more serious in its implications, he was found to be absent without leave without a pass. He must have returned to camp quickly, as the commanding officer did nothing more than admonish him. He was lucky.

Most of January 1918 was spent in training and working parties at Neuve Eglise (now Nieuwkerke) in southern Belgium. On the twenty-seventh, the battalion went back to the trenches near Warneton, south of Ypres. The weather was clear but cold and both sides were very quiet. However, one private was killed by a stray bullet on 30 January. The Germans celebrated the last day of the month by firing a *minenwerfer* (heavy mortar) shell that landed on a dugout, injuring four men.

The battalion was relieved on 4 February and was billeted in the nearby area. While some men were assigned to working parties, others took the chance to go to the baths and, on the tenth, 104 men were involved in a raiding party against the German trenches which succeeded in capturing thirty-three prisoners. The very next day, George went on leave to England until 27 February. It is to be hoped that he was able to enjoy many of the pleasures the English capital could offer.

When George returned to the battalion, it was once again in reserve in the Warneton area. On 4 March, however, it moved south into France again, billeting at Coulomby, north-east of its old base at Desvres. It stayed there, training and being involved in recreational activities until the evening of the twenty-first of the month, when orders to be ready to move at short notice were received. That very day, the Germans had launched what was to be their last offensive. Supplied with fresh troops from the Eastern Front now that newly Bolshevik Russia was out of the war, the German high command decided to make a do or die effort to head for the coast, split the British and French armies and thus win the war before American troops (that country had entered the war in April 1917) could arrive on the Western Front in large numbers.

The initial attack by the Germans took the Allies by surprise and they fell back, allowing the enemy to quickly regain the territory it had conceded in rationalising its front line a year earlier. 37 Battalion left for the area of the Somme on 23 March, arriving at Franvillers, a town lying north-east of the vital rail centre of Amiens, on the twenty-seventh. The allied troops were in full retreat and much chaos prevailed. However, the troops of 3 Division relieved retreating British units and established a defensive line that ran north-south and included the town of Villers-Bretonneux, due south of 37 Battalion. That town was the furthest the German advance on Amiens would reach, capturing then losing it again overnight around 25 April.

On the last day of the month, the battalion was relieved and moved to Buire-sur-L'Ancre, closer to the town of Albert. Enemy troops had approached this village on 28 March, but were forced to withdraw by 40 Battalion advancing in the area. The 37 Battalion war diary records that, on 2 April, the tower of the village church was destroyed by the direct hit of a German fifteen centimetre shell. The Australian artillery responded, shelling German positions.

Apart from that, however, the area was quiet for the next few days. 37 Battalion was relieved on the third and moved to a support line near Mericourt. On the fifth, the men were heavily shelled, six being wounded.

The ruins of the church at Buire-sur-l'Ancre, June 1918 (AWM E02498)

After quite a bit of movement around the district, 37 Battalion went into the front line trenches at nearby Marett Wood on 20 April. The Germans greeted them by delivering a heavy bombardment. Fortunately, however, no casualties were recorded - but the battalion's headquarters at a nearby chateau in Mericourt was destroyed. The next day, the war diary entry notes that Manfred von Richtofen, the 'Red Baron', had been shot down in the vicinity amid plenty of aircraft activity from both sides. On the twenty-second, in conjunction with the German attack on Villers-Bretonneux, heavy enemy shelling began and persisted for two days. Despite this, and the heavy use of gas shells, casualties were recorded as being very light.

From 25 April on, enemy activity in the area was only intermittent. The battalion was relieved on that same day and commenced work on the trench system, returning to action at Marett Wood on the twenty-ninth. The final German advance was now over. On the last day of the month, 37 Battalion moved to establish a line 400 to 500 metres forward in order to go closer to the enemy.

The month of May passed with some action in the front line, interspersed with reserve activity and training. While the Germans carried out bombardments from time to time, there was no move to attack and regain lost ground. The quiet nature of the front in May is reflected by the fact that, while seventy-five men were evacuated wounded, none of them subsequently died and no-one was killed.

June 1918 saw a slow but steady movement forward by George and his compatriots. On the eleventh of the month, it was decided to carry out a night raid on the enemy trenches. However, when the men were prepared to go at 2.00 am, their own guns mistakenly fired on their position and inflicted severe casualties, causing the venture to be abandoned. Two men were killed and nine wounded, for no gain. On the seventeenth, the Germans attempted to return the compliment while the battalion was holding the front line at Villers-Bretonneux. The bombardment was heavy up to 2.00

am and forty-two Germans then attacked. However, they were repelled by machine gun fire and a number of them were killed. Three were taken prisoner and all expressed surprise that they were fighting Australians, not British soldiers.

After a more successful raid on an enemy post on 21 June, 37 Battalion was relieved and spent the rest of the month in training, Over the next six weeks, the men were involved variously in training, relaxation, time spent on the front line, and slowly but surely pushing the enemy back. However, it was not until 8 August that they went on the offensive. This was the beginning of the Battle of Amiens, the event that, in the words of the German commander Erich Ludendorff, represented the 'black' day for the German Army. At 4.20 am, 100 000 infantry, deployed over twenty kilometres of front, followed a barrage raised by more than 1 000 guns. Before the attack began 37 Battalion, which had been holding a part of the front line near the town of Hamel, had withdrawn to the close rear, ready to follow on after the initial assault by 9 and 11 Brigades.

8th August 1918 by H. Septimus Powers
(ART12208 copyright © The Australian War Memorial)

All five Australian divisions were involved in the attack, which quickly netted hundreds of prisoners and guns. Lieutenant-General Sir John Monash, who orchestrated the assault, writes that 2 and 3 Divisions had a comparative 'walk over' and they came to a halt, with their tasks completed, by 7.00 am. 37 Battalion moved up at about 9.00 am to do some 'mopping up' in the captured German trenches (to ensure that no live Germans were still hiding in the captured trenches and able to emerge and fire at the backs of the advancing infantry.) At 1.00 pm the battalion commander was ordered to withdraw his troops and rest them in anticipation of a move, which came at 4.30 pm. The men proceeded to Susan Wood, on the banks of the Somme Valley. The plan was to attack towards the Somme Canal on the night of 10 August. When the attack occurred, the resistance from the Germans was heavy and the ground gained had to be given up before dawn. During the attack, three

officers (including the battalion commander, who was hit and killed by a fragment from an anti-tank shell) and around 100 other ranks were killed or injured.

At 7.15 am on 12 August the battalion moved forward and captured the village of Proyart. It is interesting to note that the acting commanding officer commented in the war diary that the 'operation was carried out under open warfare conditions and the battalion suffered very few casualties.' From 8 August, for the first time since the first few weeks of war in 1914, troops were moving openly against their foes in a war of movement. However, it was not always the case that few casualties occurred. In fact, in what were the last few weeks of war for the Australians, casualty rates were very high because of strong German resistance. Monash records that the average size of a battalion at this time was about 400 men – less than half the official complement of 900. New recruits from home were few and far between, and the corps had to rely upon men returning from injury to replenish some of the ranks. To illustrate this fact, in the month of August, 37 Battalion lost fifty-three men dead, 269 wounded and ninety-two sick.

Later on 12 August, the men went into reserve at a place called Kate Wood. There they engaged in various activities, including bathing in the Somme River. They were not completely away from the hostilities as German aircraft bombed areas in the vicinity of the battalion during the night. A couple of days later, German guns took over the bombardment during the day. The men had to be on their toes all the time.

37 Battalion returned to the trenches on 21 August. Between that date and the end of the month, it captured the villages of Bray-sur-Somme and Suzanne and by the time the nmen were relieved on 31 August, they were within striking distance of the village of Clery. They took over the forward position again the next day. Fortunately for them, and apart from enemy aircraft attacks, they were in a quiet area. They could get some rest. One point that stands out from the war diary at this time was the commander's regular comment that the men were 'very tired' after continuous, heavy fighting:

> They were in good spirits but they still needed rest. There remained the signs of the strenuous times they had passed through recently . . . the men were in splendid spirits, though they were not keen for the line again.

Unfortunately for them, the rest was short-lived. On 5 September, they were ordered to make a difficult march in the rain to Clery. When they arrived, wet through, no cover or accommodation was available. However, they moved on quickly, passing over the previously captured Mont St. Quentin and through the outskirts of thetown of Peronne. By the eleventh, and suffering constant bombardments (including gas) from the enemy, they reached the village of Bussu and rested there. The weather by this time was deteriorating and rain was frequent. To add to this, rumours were circulating that the battalion was to be disbanded and merged with another under-strength one. This adversely affected morale. As it turned out, vigorous protests from commanding officers led to a halt in the proceedings, and the decision was eventually reversed – at least until after an upcoming operation. The men noted that they had come too far with their comrades to be separated from them now.

The operation in question was an attack upon the Canal du Nord, a part of the famed German Hindenburg Line. Once this line, made up of several rows of defensive structures, was breached, the way into Germany would be open. It was to be the last battle of the war for 3 and 5 Divisions.

The Canal du Nord (AWM H09319)

The vicious battle began on 29 September, 37 Battalion moving forward slowly but surely. By 1 October, only four days before Australian involvement in the Great War would end, the men were pushing forward. Richard Travers describes it as a difficult battle, in which the troops were forced to change and improvise their plans. However, they advanced sufficiently to lay open the way to a final attack on the Hindenburg Line. For the men of 37 Battalion, their part was to take up a position along the canal bank, which they did in spite of heavy German shellfire.

It was during this day of action that George finally ran out of luck. The only report available indicates that he was struck in the left leg by a bomb fragment and carried to a casualty clearing station. While there, on 2 October, he died of his wounds. He had come through unscathed since 1916, only to die within sight of the end of the conflict.

George was buried in Doingt Communal Cemetery Extension, not far from Peronne.

(www.memories.com)

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