

# Private George Roy Lancaster

**Rod Martin**

A reading of George Lancaster's service record would suggest that he was a bit of a lad. He joined up, at his second attempt, in 1915 when he was nineteen years old. He fought bravely in a number of campaigns, including the last days at Gallipoli, being wounded on at least three occasions. However, he also got himself into trouble with the military on more than one occasion, incurring quite steep penalties. Nevertheless, he either did not learn from his mistakes or he did not care. His last offence was in 1918, only four months before his death.

George hailed from Bloom Street, Moonee Ponds. He was a clerk by trade, but it was obvious that he was also a keen military man before war broke out. He was in the senior cadets for two years and then spent twelve months in 58 Infantry (militia) Battalion before joining up. He did initially attempt to enlist, probably when war broke out, in 1914. However, he was rejected because of bad teeth. In 1914, with so many young men rushing to the recruiting offices, the military could afford to be selective. Good teeth were among the selection criteria. By July the next year, however, those criteria had been liberalised because of the demand for extra recruits, and George was accepted on his second try.

On 12 July 1915, along with a record number of other recruits that month, George signed up and was assigned to 8 Battalion. Even then, he was only nineteen and a half years old. He trained at Broadmeadows and sailed for Egypt on 15 September on S.S. *Makarini*.



S.S. *Makarini* at Port Melbourne, September 1915 (AWM PB0537)

The records suggest that George arrived in Egypt just in time to be one of the last men to be sent to Gallipoli. By the time he reached there, the decision to evacuate had probably been made, and his experience on the peninsula was short. He was evacuated on 15 December and arrived back in Alexandria on 7 January 1916. Either before he went to Anzac Cove or during the time that he was based there, he spent some time in hospital at Heliopolis, suffering from enlarged tonsils. This was to be the first of a number of visits to hospitals that he made during his time overseas.

Once all of the men were back in Egypt, the Australian Imperial force was reorganised to accommodate and allow for the many extra recruits who were arriving from Australia, and to adjust to the expected changed conditions on the Western Front. 8 Battalion was disbanded and George was transferred to 14 Battalion in March. Just how he felt about this is unknown. Many soldiers disliked being separated from the men alongside whom they had fought at Gallipoli. Suffice it to say that George could have done worse. 14 Battalion was already famous as 'Jacka's Mob', after Corporal Albert Jacka, the first Australian to win a VC at Gallipoli. It may be that some of these men, aware of their glorified status, decided that they deserved a treat or two. On 3 May, while in camp at Tel el Kebir - deliberately located in the desert some distance from Cairo - George went absent without leave. Whether he was the only one to do so at that time is not known. However, it is likely that he and possibly others headed for the fleshpots of Cairo for some recreation. He was eventually caught or returned voluntarily and was punished by being confined to barracks for seven days and losing two days' pay. This would not be his last indiscretion.

14 Battalion sailed for France in early June 1916, being based in the so-called 'nursery sector' near Armentières, a relatively quiet area of the front where new troops could acclimatise themselves to the conditions of modern industrialised warfare. For the Australians, the war would 'hot up' soon after. On 1 July, the Battle of the Somme, the greatest battle of the war, began, and the Australians would receive their first blooding three weeks later. On 19 July, 5 Division suffered 5 533 casualties in one night in a poorly planned and executed feint near the tiny village of Fromelles, north of the Somme. It was Australia's greatest ever loss in such a short period of time.

Even larger numbers were to be lost at Pozières, on the Somme, just a short while after. This time, 14 Battalion was involved. The attempt to capture the ruins of Pozières and the strategically important ridge behind them began on 23 July and was to last until 15 September. The ruins and the ridge were taken, but little else. 4 Division, of which 14 Battalion was part, was ordered into battle on 6 August and told to advance towards the fortified posts of Mouquet Farm and Thiepval. By the time it was replaced nine days later the division had suffered 4649 casualties, more than half its full complement. On 26 August it was once again attacking Mouquet Farm. By the time it finished its service there in September, another 2409 casualties had been incurred. These included a second lieutenant Jacka, who had been wounded in late August. They also included Private George Lancaster. He was wounded in the side of his chest and evacuated to hospital in Amiens. Later, he was transferred to a hospital in Rouen and remained there until early September, when he rejoined his unit. Then began a series of mishaps. On 17 October he was admitted to hospital to be treated for scabies and exhaustion. It is not known how long he stayed there. On 10 November, he was hospitalised with mumps, and stayed out of the action until

12 March the following year. He was only back with his unit for a short time when he was wounded in the leg on 11 April – the first day of the Australian attack on Germany's redoubtable Hindenburg Line at Bullecourt. This assault, again poorly planned and executed, ended with the loss of some 3 000 casualties, including 1 300 taken prisoner.



Mouquet Farm, looking south towards Pozières, 1916

(AWM E00005)



Bullecourt after the second battle there, May 1917

(AWM E01408)

George rejoined his unit on 27 May. At that time it was in reserve at Doulieu and involved in training activities. At the end of the month, however, 14 Battalion moved north into the Ypres area of Belgium in preparation for a major assault there. The Battle of the Somme petered out with the onset of winter in late 1916 and in mid-1917 British commander-in-chief Sir Douglas Haig decided on a new attack, to start in June, with the target being the village of Passchendaele, north-east of Ypres. The aim was to capture the German-held portion of the Belgian coast, containing submarine pens, and to demoralise the German defenders in that country. The attack started well with the Battle of Messines in early June. 14 Battalion was involved in the fray, which resulted in the capture of the strategic Messines Ridge. However, the next stage of the assault was delayed until the end of July, a major attack that coincided with the beginning of heavy rains that turned the naturally marshy battlefield into a quagmire.

In early July, while the battalion was based at St. Yves, George was given some leave and went to London. He must have discovered something interesting there because he went absent without leave at the end of his furlough. When the authorities did finally catch up with him, he lost seventeen days' pay for his troubles.

George would have been back with his unit by the time it was involved in some action in August. The battalion's war diary faithfully records the wet conditions and their effect upon the battlefield. The men were in the area near Neuve Eglise, involved in sporadic fighting with the Germans. At the end of the month, they went into reserve, not going into combat again until September 26. By that time, Australian forces had won a small but significant battle at Menin Road that provided them with access to nearby Polygon Wood. 4 and 5 Divisions then attacked the wood on the twenty-sixth and succeeded in taking it the same day. The attack, accompanied by a very effective rolling barrage of shells was, like Menin Road before it, part of the successful 'bite and hold' strategy adopted by British general Sir Herbert Plumer and Major-General John Monash. The costs were still high, however: 5 000 casualties at Menin Road alone.



Looking towards Passchendaele Ridge, 1917. (AWM E00892)

In mid-October, 4 Division was involved in an attack on Passchendaele Ridge in appallingly muddy conditions. The attack was a failure, quickly becoming bogged down in the mire. George received a shrapnel wound to the mouth during this attack, and was taken to a hospital in the field. From there, he was transferred to a hospital in Ontario, Canada, on 6 December. He returned to England on 23 January 1918, but he was then in hospital again, this time suffering from hearing problems and a sprained ankle. Let loose in the mother country, he once again returned to his old tricks, going absent without leave on 9 April. This time the authorities decided enough was enough. He not only lost another fifteen days' pay, but he also incurred fourteen days' Field Punishment Number Two – heavy labour.

George finally returned to France on 17 April. By that time, the Germans' final offensive was in full swing, the Allies retreating in the face of a massive assault designed to end the war before new allies in the form of American troops could arrive on the battlefield in large numbers. The main battlefield was now once again the Somme, and 14 Battalion was attempting to hold the line at Sailly-aux-Bois. Later in the month, it moved to a location near Villers-Bretonneux, lost and recaptured during the famous battle on Anzac Day.

The Allies slowly but surely turned the tide against the Germans during the next three months. On 4 July, accompanied by American troops, 4 Division won the Battle of Hamel in ninety-three minutes – a tribute to the close order planning of Australian commander Sir John Monash. This battle set the scene for the major allied counter-attack that began on 8 August. 14 Battalion was based at Morcourt, near Amiens, on that day and moved forwards, quickly capturing the town after advancing along the Hamel-Cerisy Road in thick fog. By the eighteenth it was at Harbonnières. The war diary reports that the German artillery was very active during the day, and that one man was killed and four wounded. George was one of these. Perhaps he was killed outright and reported as such, or perhaps he was wounded and died later. There are no records concerning his death.

George was buried in Heath Military Cemetery at Harbonnières. He was twenty-two and a half years old.



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

## Sources

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Commonwealth War Graves Commission

[en.wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org)

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