

Private George Nelson MM



(Gayle Murray)

Three Nelson brothers enlisted within a month of each other in the middle of 1915. Aged twenty, George was the middle one in terms of age. His father being dead, his mother gave him written permission to join up. As she put it, he was ‘anxious to enlist’.

June-July 1915 was a heady time for the Australian recruiters. Enrolments had been high since the outbreak of war the previous August, and a new recruiting campaign instituted after the Gallipoli landing was continuing to inspire young men to join up. It would seem that George actually tried to enlist in what was then called the Australian Expeditionary Force in 1914, as his attestation form indicates that he had been rejected because of something to do with his chest. Given his youth and a successful medical examination, it may well be the case that the only thing wrong with his chest in 1914 was its size. The regulations stipulated a minimum chest expansion of thirty-four inches and, in 1914, there were so many young men trying to enlist that the recruiters could afford to be very choosy and apply the regulations in full. It is interesting to note that on George’s attestation form, the chest measurements are written in a different script that is darker than the other listed details. Did a sympathetic doctor or recruiting officer decide to falsify the details the second time around? After all, George was anxious to enlist and his enthusiasm may have been infectious.

The chest measurement issue is no surprise, as George was slightly-built man, 173 centimetres tall and fifty-seven kilos in weight. He was a painter by trade, had blue eyes and brown hair and had had some previous experience in senior cadets. He was initially assigned to 3 Reinforcements of 21 Battalion but was soon transferred to 2 Division Light Trench Mortar Battery, specifically 6 LTMB. After doing his initial training, he sailed for Egypt on A68 HMAT *Anchises* on 26 August.



HMAT *Anchises* at Port Melbourne, March 1916 (AWM PB0099)

By 12 October, George and his compatriots were at Gallipoli. The big battles had already been fought, a kind of stalemate had developed and winter was coming on. Nearly 8 000 Australians had lost their lives for little or no real gain. For George and the others, it was a matter of holding their positions and avoiding being killed or wounded. They stayed in their positions at for the next two months and were then involved in the mass evacuation from the peninsula in December.

Once back in Egypt, the men were quickly prepared for a move to the Western Front in France ahead of the infantry. They sailed on 19 March 1916, arriving in Marseilles on the twenty-sixth. After travelling north by train, they reached the training base at Etaples where they were introduced to the very different conditions of the war in Europe. On 9 April, the battery attended a Stokes mortar gun school at nearby Terdeghem. The Stokes light mortar has been described by some as being the most important invention of the First World War. It was portable and had a rapid firing capacity, used three-inch bombs and was designed for close range firing. The design has provided the basis for all mortars built since that time.

After finishing at the school, 6 LTMB moved into the trenches at Fleurbaix, in the so-called 'nursery sector' in northern France. This was a relatively quiet part of the Western Front and the Australian arrivals in early 1916 were sent there to acclimatise themselves to trench warfare without being placed in unnecessary danger.



Sir Wilfred Stokes with his mortar (en.wikipedia.org)

While the artillery was in the nursery sector the infantry divisions began arriving from Egypt. 6 LTMB was attached to 2 Division, which was slated to be blooded at the Battle of Pozières on the Somme in late July. In early July the battery began moving south towards the Somme, arriving at St. Sauvier on the eleventh and having a swimming parade in the Somme the next day. The Battle of Pozières began on 23 July, 1 Division attacking the German line in an attempt to capture the ruined village and the strategically important ridge behind it. 2 Division relieved 1 Division on 25 July. By that time the latter had advanced, but had suffered 5 285 casualties in the process. 6 LTMB went into the trenches at Sausage Valley/Gully on the twenty-sixth. Lieutenant Ted Rule tells us that it was the best hiding place for artillery in that part of the battlefield. Everyone who saw the place described it as having guns 'wheel to wheel' its whole length. However, he also added that, as such, it was a legitimate target for the German artillery. Sausage Valley was anything but safe.

By 28 July, 6 LTMB had fired 470 rounds at German trenches and had kept the enemy machine gun activity down as a result. However, the battery commander noted that 6 and 7 LTMBs' casualties that day were 'rather high'.



Sausage Valley August 1916

(AWM EZ0113)

The battery did have its successes. The war diary notes that on 5 August, for example, one mortar group fired sixty rounds at 7 am 'with great success, blowing out whole [German] position and killing all occupants including a Colonel & 2 other officers. M[achine] guns & belts of ammunition were brought away from this position.'

6 LTMB stayed in Sausage Valley until 7 August, after which it moved into reserve behind the lines at Warloy. While in the valley, the battery had suffered one dead and fourteen wounded, the fatality probably occurring when one of the mortars suffered a direct hit.



The Mouquet Farm battlefield, October 1916.

(AWM H15927)

By 22 August, the men were back in action, this time supporting the Australian assault on Mouquet Farm, near Pozières. Several attempts were made that month to capture this heavily reinforced position, without success and at great human cost. As an example, the battery's diary notes that 21 Battalion lost most of its officers in an attack and the troops got out of hand and went too far – presumably becoming isolated, cut off and then picked off by the Germans.

6 LTMB fired 1 950 rounds in support that day. However, it lost two mortars from direct hits and lost another when it was buried by an exploding shell and could not be found. Six men were wounded during the conflict.

The battery went into reserve again the next day, travelling north to a location near Poperinghe in Belgium. On 27 September, the diary reported that George was evacuated to hospital with a 'swollen nose'. He was taken to Boulogne for treatment, and stayed there until 2 December, so the likelihood arises that his nose was actually broken. His record contains a written emphasis that the injury was NOT sustained in the performance of military duty. It would be reasonable to suspect that he got into a fight and received at least one heavy blow to the face as a result.

George returned to his unit on 10 December. By that time, it was located back at the Somme, in the district of Flesselles, just north of Amiens. 6 LTMB was involved in attacks on the nearby German positions, and this continued until it moved towards the trenches at Trones Wood, on the western edge of Amiens. The men took control of a trench and were ordered to build mortar emplacements there. They had a problem, however: the trench had three feet (one metre) of water in it! Christmas Day found them still building their emplacements. Presumably, they stopped work for a while to enjoy lunch.



Trones Wood 1917

(AWM H08776)

On 30 December, along with eleven others from 6 LTMB, George relieved some of his compatriots in the nearby front line and stayed there until 3 January. 6 LTMB spent Christmas and New Year 1917 in Trones Wood, alternately spending time in the front line and then recuperating in reserve. George's next turn at the guns came on 11 January and lasted until the fifteenth. We have to appreciate that, as an operator of a Stokes light mortar, George had to be located very close to the enemy trenches. The Stokes fired a small bomb through a very high trajectory, so its targets had to be nearby. Being very close to the enemy trenches was very dangerous. They could fire mortars and other weapons back at you.

In the early months of 1917, 6 LTMB stayed in the Somme region. At the start of May, it supported Australian troops as they attacked in what was called the Second Battle of Bullecourt. The unit diary described it as a 'very big stunt', and noted that the Australian casualties on 3 May were 'very heavy'. In fact, the Australians suffered 7 000 casualties during Second Bullecourt. A small amount of territory was gained, including a foothold in the supposedly impregnable Hindenburg Line. However, the human cost outweighed the strategic importance of the victory. Between 2 and 6 May, 6 LTMB suffered six men killed in action, one who died of his wounds and twelve who were wounded.

On 16 May, while still based at Bullecourt, George took some leave in England. When he returned two to three weeks later, the battery had moved into reserve at Riencourt. While there, George was awarded the Military Medal on 29 May. According to the citation, he and six other men entered a captured German trench at the start of Second Bullecourt on 3 May. They presumably set up their mortars there and remained with them, firing regularly, until relieved at dawn on 5 May. They followed all orders, and held their position despite the battery losing more than half its personnel. They inflicted 'very heavy' casualties on the other side. Their fire straddled one German party, causing it to halt. When it did, George and the others 'blew it out', not leaving one survivor. All seven Australians received the Military Medal for their gallantry and devotion to duty.

6 LTMB stayed in the area of Riencourt until the beginning of September, when it moved north into Belgium to provide support for the action known as the Third Battle of Ypres. This battle had started at the end of July and was ostensibly designed to capture the German-held portion of the Belgian coast and the submarine pens contained therein. Hopefully, a success in this endeavour would both relieve the submarine pressure on the all-important Atlantic convoys bringing troops and materiel from North America as well as demoralising the German forces. By September, the aim had not been achieved and the battle had turned into one of simple attrition – carried out in incredibly muddy conditions thanks to heavy rains since July. The battery was in action in the Ypres area by the sixteenth of the month and, on 20 September supported Australian forces as they participated in the Battle of Menin Road – another 'big stunt' according to the unit diary, and very successful, with all objectives taken. Another attack at nearby Polygon Wood a few days later was equally successful. Both assaults, however, resulted in large number of Australian casualties.

The battery remained in the Ypres area until the end of 1917. It was in action on a regular basis. As an example, it lost two killed in action, two missing in action and fifteen wounded on 3-4 October. Later that month, George was promoted to the rank of

lance-corporal. It came a day before he was presented with his military medal in the field by the commander of 1 Anzac Corps, Lieutenant-General Sir William Birdwood.



General Birdwood awarding a medal in the field, May 1917
(AWM E00452)

6 LTMB stayed in Belgian Flanders for the remainder of the year, spending Christmas and New Year at Neuve Eglise. In early February, George received a promotion to temporary corporal. The word 'promotion' should only be used loosely in this context. The usual practice with temporary appointments was to encumber the appointee with the responsibilities of the role without paying the associated remuneration!



A Stokes mortar emplacement near Ypres, January 1918 (AWM E01448)

Unfortunately, the unit diary for the battery ends at December 1917. However, we are able to get an idea of its movements and actions by looking at the diary of 7 LTMB, with which it was closely associated. We know that, along with many of the troops in

Belgium, the battery was relocated to France in April 1918 to help stem the tide of the last great German offensive, launched the previous month. In the early days, the Germans recaptured all of the territory they lost on the Somme in 1916 or ceded when they consolidated their defence behind the Hindenburg Line at the start of 1917. They even threatened Paris again, for the first time since 1914. 6 LTMB operated in the area of Amiens, and was probably used in support of the Australian forces that captured and then recaptured Villers-Bretonneux on Anzac Day 1918.

The German advance had been halted by the end of April and the Allies then began consolidating and preparing for a counter-attack. By late June, George and his compatriots were in the vicinity of Allonville. At that time, he was joined by his younger brother Alex, who had transferred from the field ambulance – perhaps for a bit of action before the war ended. Unfortunately, their reunion was very short. On 2 July George was sent to hospital with a dental problem. During the time he was away from the front, Alex was killed on 22 July at Monument Wood, near Villers-Bretonneux. We do not know if George had heard the sad news before he returned to the battery on 15 August. If not, he would no doubt have looked for his brother. However, Alex was gone. This would have been a sad time for George and his older brother Alfred, a private in 59 Infantry Battalion. To add insult to grievous injury, George had also lost his temporary corporal position.



6 LTMB on the Somme, June 1918

(AWM E02484)

Despite his grief, George had to fight on. By 8 August, the Allies were ready to counter-attack and moved forward on a broad front at the Somme. By the time George returned to his unit, it was located near Bussy. The advance after this time was fairly rapid, all the territory lost since March being regained, and the breaching of the Hindenburg Line being the ultimate aim. During the movement, George was reappointed to the temporary corporal position.

The last Australian action of the war was the attack at Montbrehain in eastern France. The battles at St. Quentin Canal and Montbrehain marked the breaching of the Hindenburg Line. Sadly again for George, Alfred was killed at the St. Quentin Canal on

29 September, his body never found. He got so near to surviving the war. 6 LTMB actively supported the infantry at Montbrehain. Once that battle was over, the Australian forces were replaced by Americans and went into reserve.

After the war, the troops slowly but surely returned to England, waiting to be repatriated to Australia. During this time, George was promoted to corporal in January 1919 but then blotted his copybook by going absent without leave for a day in March. Perhaps it was because of a pretty English girl! Whatever the reason, however, no punishment is recorded in his file. Such temporary disappearances may have been quite common occurrences at that time.

George returned to Australia on 18 April and was discharged from the army on 22 July. Three Nelsons had gone to war, but only one returned. They would have been very sad but proud days in the house at 5 Nottingham Street, Kensington.

Sources

Australian War Memorial

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