Private George Abbott
- the man who wasn't there?

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Sometimes, real mysteries are contained in the records of the men who volunteered to fight in the First World War. The story of Private George Abbott is one of them. Why did he resort to subterfuge and apparent skullduggery? What happened to him? Who was he really? These are questions that probably will never be answered. When balanced against the evidence available, however, they raise very interesting possibilities.

In a military sense, George Abbott was a mystery right from the start. The front page of his attestation paper states that he enlisted on 11 November 1915. However, the reverse side, containing a declaration, indicates that this thirty-three year old married man , born in Montreal, Canada, a seven-year veteran of the Royal Navy (but his discharge papers had conveniently been lost in 1901) and a rigger and splicer by trade, joined up on 22 September 1916. Moreover, his record states that he was at Broadmeadows training camp in August 1916 and received his first inoculation on the twenty-first of that month. What happened to the nine or ten months in between? And why the discrepancy between the dates? On the surface of it, these are mysteries.

They don't end there, however. On 6 March 1916, a man by the name of George Connors enlisted in Melbourne. Supposedly a widower whose address was care of Fitzroy Post Office, his next of kin was listed as a sister named Mary Ryan, also of Fitzroy Post Office. Mr. Connors was attached to 23 Depot Battalion, based at Royal Park. However, his record indicates that he was struck off the army list as a deserter on 4 May. Moreover, an inventory of items he took with him indicates that it included most if not all of his uniform and kit. One wonders what else he might have taken from the depot.

At this point, the reader may well ask what George Connors has to do with George Abbott. Well, Mr. Connors' attestation papers are included in George Abbott's file, and a note has been written on Connors' statement of service: 'This man is identical with one George Abbott, a deserter from Broadmeadows'. And indeed he was: same height, weight, physical features and tattoos (a distinctive 'bracelet' around each wrist) – and a sailor, rigger and splicer to boot.

Where does this leave us? Further research by Lenore Frost, especially into the 1916 editions of the *Victoria Police Gazette*, provides the following information.
Abbott did enlist in November 1915, but then deserted in January the following year. Two months later, on 6 March, he enlisted as George Connors (for unknown reasons), but had deserted again by 4 May. Sometime in May-June, he was caught (as Abbott) by the police and taken back to camp at Broadmeadows. By 22 June, he had deserted yet again. On 13 July, he was caught as Connors, tried for larceny in the Melbourne Court of Petty Sessions (was it for his army kit, or some other items?) and sentenced to one month in prison. When he was released on 11 August, he was immediately arrested by the police

criminal investigation section as Abbott and returned once again to Broadmeadows. And so he was there in late August to receive his inoculations. One could make the conjecture that the army gave him a choice: go to military prison as a deserter, or go to war. If so, he obviously chose the latter! Just why he volunteered in the first place, and then enlisted under another name after he had deserted, only to desert again (and again!) is yet another mystery. Perhaps he saw the army as a (temporary) hiding place from criminal elements that were pursuing him. We shall probably never know.

Abbott was originally assigned to 14 Battalion which, by late 1916, was known as 'Jacka's Mob', a title it gave itself after Lance-Corporal Albert Jacka won the first Australian VC of the war at Gallipoli. He finally completed his interrupted training at Broadmeadows and embarked on A71 HMAT *Nestor* at Port Melbourne on 2 October 1916 (probably with a military policeman at his back to ensure that he actually went aboard!) as a member of 21 Reinforcements. He sailed via the Cape of Good Hope and landed in Plymouth, southern England, on 16 November. He completed further training at Codford, and embarked for Etaples, France, on 7 February 1917.

He had already been in trouble before he arrived in France, however. On 25 October, while at sea, he failed to report for a 6.30 am parade and forfeited seven days' pay as a result. Once in England, he went absent without leave for eight days in January. As punishment, he was given eight days' detention, and forfeited nineteen days' pay. One wonders if he returned to camp voluntarily or if he was apprehended by the MPs. It may have been his fourth attempt to desert.

George's stay at Etaples (a training camp) was short. 14 Battalion's reinforcements were needed for participation in the Australians' first major battle of 1917. The Australian troops had been 'blooded' – quite literally – on the killing fields of Fromelles, Pozières and elsewhere on the Somme during the previous year, suffering great numbers of casualties. The start of 1917 still found them located in the area of the Somme Valley, fighting sporadic actions with their German opponents. They had weathered the wettest and coldest European winter for forty years, but had received a fillip in February and March when the Germans staged a strategic retreat to the heavily fortified Hindenburg Line and solidly entrenched themselves. The Allies were able to easily occupy the ground left by the Germans. The retreat, however, did not change the military situation. The Germans still occupied large proportions of France and Belgium.

As winter turned to spring, British command planned a couple of offensives aimed at the Hindenburg Line, one at Arras and the other at Bullecourt. Led by British Fifth Army commander, Sir Hubert Gough, the Allied forces planned to use a combined tank/infantry attack to achieve surprise at Bullecourt. Instead of the usual preliminary barrage to 'soften' the Germans up, twelve of the recently introduced 'tank' weapons would strike across no man's land, destroying the barbed wire barricades. Infantry would then rush through the gaps created and storm the German trenches.

That was the plan, anyway. The battle was delayed by a day because only three of the tanks had arrived on time. Others had either broken down, had 'accidents' or been delayed by muddy conditions, shell-damaged roads or an inconveniently timed blizzard.

An early British tank, Flers 1917. (AWM H09244)

The ones that did arrive made a hideous noise in doing so, removing any chance the Allies may have had of surprising the Germans with them. Despite the fact that no further tanks arrived at the jumping off point, the impetuous Gough insisted on the attack going ahead the next morning. He was anxious to please his boss Sir Douglas Haig, who wanted a quick action to coincide with the offensive at Arras.

So the men, including those from 14 Battalion, went over the top at 4.30 am on 11 April. The tanks were soon out of the action and the fact that some of the troops made it to the first German trenches was an achievement in itself. However, those men were stranded because they were not given artillery support once they got there. The British believed that they would quickly progress to the next line of trenches, and the commanders didn't want to take the risk of bombarding their own forces. The men in the German trenches had no choice but to either retreat or be captured.

South-east of Bullecourt, May 1917. The tank on the horizon broke down during the first assault on 11 April. All three were out of action by 10 am. (AWM E01408)

As with so many other Allied offensives in the war, what became known as the First Battle of Bullecourt cost a large number of casualties. Seventy-nine Australian officers and 2260 other ranks were killed or injured, and 1300 taken into captivity. Les Carlyon describes the whole affair as a 'bloody fiasco'.

At some stage in the attack, George Abbott disappeared. The Germans did not report that he was in captivity. His body was never found. He may have been blown to pieces by a German shell, he may have fallen into a water-filled shell hole, drowned and sunk into the mud at the bottom, or his dead or dying body may have been covered up by the debris created by a shell explosion. It may also be the case, however, that he deserted before the attack actually began. Such an act would seem to be in keeping with his character. And desertion *was* possible. Richard Travers, in his book *Diggers in France: Australian soldiers on the Western Front*, notes that Sir William Birdwood, in command of 1 Anzac Corps, recorded in his diary that some men, when their battalion was ordered to go to the trenches, 'quietly slipped away to the rear'. Official historian Charles Bean (originally a war correspondent on the Western Front) describes them as being 'in some cases actual criminals who had enlisted without any intention of serving at the front, and ready to go to any means to avoid it' (both quoted on p. 218). They may well have been writing about the likes of George Abbott.

A court of enquiry later listed Abbott as having been killed, and his name was engraved on the Villers Bretonneux Memorial after the war (along with false information about his birthplace – Hobart - and the supposed names of his parents: this was probably what he told his wife). However, the possibility that he may have deserted – yet again – cannot be discounted. No trace of him was ever found. In 1921, the army's base records office in Melbourne wrote to his wife, asking if she had any information from him that indicated where he was at the time he disappeared and presumably died. They could find no evidence of his final resting place. This was a standard request in cases where bodies had not been found. His wife wrote back, saying that, after he left Australia's shores, she received <u>no</u> communications from him (her emphasis), and no replies to the letters she sent to him. All she knew was that he was at Bullecourt . She may well have received this information from a Mrs. Archer, whose husband was also in 14 Battalion, had died on the same day and whose body was also never found. She mentions Mrs. Archer and the detail about Mr. Archer in her reply.

And so George Abbott disappeared from view, possibly laying on the battlefield as one of the many undiscovered dead, possibly elsewhere. Lest the reader think that I am being too hard on a man who may have sacrificed his life for his country, there is an interesting postscript to this story. In 1944, twenty-seven years after Abbott disappeared, the army records office received an enquiry from the Prudential Insurance Company of America. It was looking for evidence regarding one of its insured. The letter indicated the company's belief that the man recorded as George Abbott in the army records was actually a Charles F. Coye, born in Marlboro, Massachusetts, in 1882. Somehow, the people there must have received information that indicated this possibility. One may wonder just who was in a position to provide it! The company was particularly concerned to discover whether he was ever located after being declared missing in action. When the records office sent details regarding Abbott to the company, it responded by stating its determination that the two men were one and the same!

George Abbott's/Connor's/Coye's life was a lie. Why couldn't his death be as well?

Sources

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