

# Private Charles Murray Bloomfield

Rod Martin

Charles Bloomfield's war was tragically short. He only lasted seven months after arriving in France before he died of wounds in hospital in Etaples, France. His death was a second blow to his parents in a short space of time. His older brother Walter had been killed in the Sinai the previous August. In his short time at the front, however, Charles fought in one of the bloodiest battles of the war: Pozières.

Charles was a clerk by profession, lived in Bellair Road, Kensington, and was aged nineteen when he enlisted with his parents' permission in August 1915. At 180 centimetres, he was taller than average for that time and he weighed in at a rather lean sixty-six kilos. He did have considerable military experience, however, having spent five years in first the senior cadets and then the militia. Enlisting after the landing at Gallipoli, and aware of the growing death toll there, he became one of the so-called 'Fair Dinkums': men who volunteered despite the increasing chance of being severely wounded or dying in the conflict.

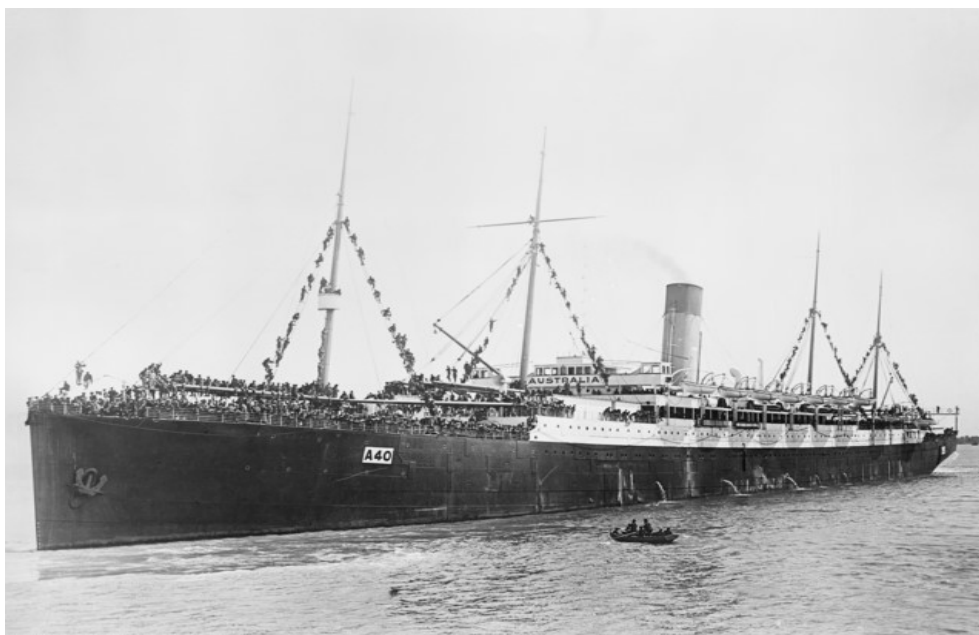
Charles was assigned to 12 Reinforcements of 6 Infantry Battalion, trained at Broadmeadows and sailed from Port Melbourne on A40 HMAT *Ceramic* on 23 November that same year.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

PB0300

Troops at Port Melbourne waiting to board HMAT *Ceramic*, 23 November 1915  
(AWM PB0300)



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

PB0284A

*Ceramic* leaving Port Melbourne, 23 November 1915

(AWM PB0284A)

Charles arrived in Egypt some time late in December and joined many other Australian troops there. He was probably transported to the newly created Australian base at Tel el Kebir, on the edge of the desert, south of the Nile Delta. The evacuation from Gallipoli had been completed on the nineteenth and the survivors were also moved to Tel el Kebir on 7 January and mixed in with the new arrivals to replenish the existing battalions' numbers and, in some cases, form the nucleus of newly created ones. Charles was chosen to remain with 6 Battalion. Unfortunately, no war records for the battalion for the first six months of 1916 still exist, so we have to rely on the reports presented by 2 Infantry Brigade, of which 6 Battalion was part. The reports inform us that, after a few weeks of training and along with the rest of the brigade, 6 Battalion moved to Serapeum, on the Suez canal, on 24 January.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

A02439

A pontoon bridge across the canal at Serapeum, early 1916

(AWM A02439)

Control of the canal was vital for the Allies. Troops, supplies and equipment from points further east (including Australia) moved through the canal on a regular basis. The Turks knew this and, after the Gallipoli evacuation, transferred a large number of their forces to Palestine and the Sinai Desert in preparation for an attack on the canal and its capture. Fearing this, many of the allied troops in Egypt were sent to the canal and a defensive posture was set up inland from its eastern bank. The brigade remained at Serapeum throughout the month of February, constructing defensive works such as trenches and also sending out patrols further east to reconnoitre and search for water holes, so vital in desert areas.

On 2 March, while still at Serapeum, the brigade received notice that, as part of the newly formed 1 Anzac Division, it would be departing for the Western Front in about a fortnight's time. On the nineteenth, while preparing to depart, the brigade was honoured by a visit from the Prince of Wales and Lieutenant-General Birdwood (commander of the Anzac forces). The brigadier wrote that they and their staff '*rode through lines of the bde. and were given an ovation by the troops.*'



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

H1 2957

The Prince of Wales (middle) and General Birdwood (background) arriving at Serapeum.  
(AWM H12957)

The brigade began moving out on 22 March, heading for Alexandria. 6 Battalion sailed from there on the twenty-seventh, bound for Marseilles. When the men arrived there on 2 April, they entrained and travelled north to St. Omer. While many later reports of arrivals noted that the troops were conveyed in cattle or horse wagons, it seems that the 1 Division first arrivals were conveyed in proper carriages, even if they were overcrowded.

The 972 men of 6 Battalion finally arrived at billets at Bailleul, about thirteen kilometres north-west of the town of Armentières. All of the Anzac troops were sent to that area upon arrival in France because it was a relatively quiet part of the Western Front – the so-called ‘nursery sector’. It would give the unseasoned troops the chance to get used to the realities of modern industrial warfare on a massive scale without being placed in too much danger. The men began training the next day and

continued in this fashion until they moved to the small town of Fleurbaix, adjacent to the front line, on 19 April. In the distance, across No Man's Land between the opposing trenches and past the German lines, they would have been able to see parts of the enemy-held village of Fromelles – a place that was to become infamous in Australian military history exactly three months later.

But that wasn't for 1 Division, however. It stayed at Fleurbaix into May, in conflict with the Germans on the other side. 2 Brigade headquarters, for example, were shelled on the second and the unit suffered its first recorded death the next day.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

H15912N

Photo taken from Fleurbaix in 1915, looking across No Man's Land in the direction of Fromelles (AWM H15912N)

By the fifth, the brigade had lost eleven killed and thirty-six wounded. The area may have been 'relatively quiet', but it was still quite deadly.

2 Brigade continued in action until the end of the month, its various battalions (four of them) rotating in and out of the front line on a fortnightly basis. The men suffered bombardments from all kinds of shells, including ones filled with gas. They were required to be on their toes at all times.

The men finally went into reserve at nearby Sailly on 3 June. How close they still were to the front can be gauged by the fact that a cloud of gas drifted over the town on the seventeenth. However, the brigade had been warned that it was coming, and no casualties were suffered. Towards the end of the month, 6 Battalion moved north, just over the Belgian border, to Neuve Eglise (now Nieuwkerke). The men were destined

to take over part of the Ypres front, near Messines, south of the town. Once there, they worked on heavily damaged trenches, bringing them up to scratch. However, their stay in Belgium was short-lived. The Battle of the Somme, probably the greatest battle of the war, had begun on 1 July and was already going badly. Extra troops were needed to extend the small amount of territory already gained. As a result, the battalion was back in Bailleul by 9 July. By the twenty-second, the men were occupying the old British trench line near the town of Albert, on the Somme. On 25 July they took up a position on the north-eastern side of the village of Pozières.

Pozières was a significant target for the British forces. It was a German artillery position that protected their strong-point at the village of Thiepval. The ridge behind Pozières, and the site of a destroyed windmill on that ridge, constituted the highest points in the area. Control of the ridge would allow the Allies to observe the German trenches and fortifications, and provide access to Thiepval. The initial attack on Pozières, conducted by British troops, began on the first day of the Somme. British commander-in-chief, Sir Douglas Haig, was hoping to capture the ridge on the first day of the battle. Cavalry could then sweep through and capture Bapaume, ten miles distant. This never happened, of course. The initial attack failed at great cost and, by 20 July, when members of 1 Anzac Corps entered the front line, Haig had planned a second offensive, to be conducted across a twenty-mile front, with 1 Australian Division being given the task of finally capturing Pozières and the ridge. Pozières had to fall if the British advance were to continue.

The initial Australian attack began at 12.30 on the morning of 23 July, following an enormous bombardment. Peter Cochrane tells us that the troops ‘jog-trotted past limp British corpses strung on barbed wire and drove the Germans before them, taking all but one of the objectives set.’ They won about three thousand yards of ground, taking a foothold in the ruins of the village. The Germans were not going to willingly accept this defeat, however. When 6 Battalion began to move forward into the ruined village on the twenty-fifth, it had to pass through a heavy German barrage and then attempt to establish a trench line running from the village cemetery to an orchard. The Germans were firing back, sniping in particular, and losses among the Australians were heavy. Despite the opposition, however, the trench line was completed.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E00001

The heavily damaged old Pozières Cemetery 1916

(AWM E00001)

Pozières was important to the Germans as well. They concentrated a bombardment on the Australians that lasted for three days, hoping to drive them out. It was a merciless, continuous pounding, says Cochrane and Bill Gammage comments that Australian soldiers had never endured a more terrible bombardment. Archie Barwick, a farmer with 1 Battalion, wrote:

*They dug trenches; the guns obliterated them. They crouched in holes; the guns found them and blew them to oblivion . . . We were nearly all in a state of silliness and half-dazed, but still the Australians refused to give ground.*

Having been under bombardment all day, the troops were finally ordered to go forward at 9.00 pm and occupy the village. This they did. In the process of establishing themselves, however, a number of men were lost to German shellfire. At 3.30 the next morning, they were order to attack through and beyond the village.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

A05776

The main street of Pozières, December 1916

(AWM A05776)

They were able to do this, but again at great cost as the Germans fought them every inch of the way. One patrol got within 100 yards of the nearby Mouquet Farm before encountering sizeable numbers of German troops, all heading towards the site of the windmill as if gathering for a counter-attack. Australian guns were directed on to this grouping and disrupted it.

In the village, the men held the positions they had gained despite fierce opposition from the Germans. And the battle went on day and night. For example, at 1.00am on the twenty-sixth, the Germans' continual bombardment of the front and communication trenches, the roads and the whole village increased in intensity, so much so that officers were forced to move their men to the left or into shell holes to keep them away from the barrage. Had they not done so, wrote the battalion commander, many more lives would have been lost.

6 Battalion was relieved at 3.00 am on 27 July and moved through the old British front line, heading back to Albert. It had lost nineteen men killed and 175 wounded. In its three days of action, 1 Division had suffered 5 285 casualties.

However, the division had not seen the last of Pozières. Over the next two weeks, 2 and 4 Divisions also had a go. 2 Division attacked towards the windmill site, but was forced to retreat in the face of German opposition. For their efforts, the men were criticised by Haig. Then, on 4 August, they finally took Pozières ridge. When it was relieved two days later, the division had suffered 6 846 casualties. 4 Division then took over, being ordered to advance towards Mouquet Farm and Thiepval. Mouquet Farm was another German fortification. They had dug a number of tunnels underneath it, in which to shelter from bombardments and regroup for attacks. It was heavily defended and almost impossible to breach. Nine days later, 1 Division was back in the action, but nothing had been achieved - at 4 Division's cost of 4 649 casualties.

6 Battalion had been in reserve at Bonneville, licking its wounds, but was ordered back to Pozières and reached the trenches on 15 August. The men found that the area had been badly knocked about by German shelling, which was continuing while they were trying to improve their conditions. At night, the bombardment was so bad that the men were unable to get any sleep. On the evening of the eighteenth, after a barrage from the Australian guns, the men moved forward again, towards the ruins of the farm. However, they immediately came under heavy fire from bombs and machine guns and were beaten back. The commander of 8 Battalion gave four reasons for the failure of the attack: first, the artillery did not stop the machine guns in the enemy strong posts or effectively shell the enemy's trench; secondly, some of the enemy's strong posts were still intact, when the division on the right should have been attacking them; thirdly, the attack would have had a greater chance of success if it had been conducted in daylight and, finally, the digging of an advanced jumping off trench before the attack alerted the enemy to the battalion's intentions.

Having achieved nothing, 1 Division was relieved on 22 August and replaced by 2 Division. For its pains, 1 Division had suffered a further 2 650 casualties, 223 of them from 6 Battalion. The men then went into reserve, reaching the asylum in Ypres, Belgium, by 30 August.

2 Division did finally reach Mouquet Farm, on 26 August. However, it was unable to hold it, suffering a further 1 268 casualties in the conflict. 4 Division then relieved it, and was able to push the salient a little closer. Nevertheless, the farm remained elusive, and that division lost a further 2 409 men in the process.

The Australians finally withdrew from Pozières on 15 September. Their total casualties in forty-five days on the Somme front were 24 139. Their gain was small: Pozières and the ridge behind it. Of the Battle of Pozières, war historian Charles Bean wrote that the area

. . . is more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth.

For its part, 6 Battalion did not stay in reserve in Belgium for long. Conflict was still going on in the Ypres salient, as it had been since the first battle there in late 1914. On 12 September, the battalion took over the forward trenches near the Ypres Canal. During the thirteen days the men spent there, the mornings were quiet but, at around 4.00 pm, the Germans would send over mortar bombs and rifle grenades. Charles and

his comrades would reply with Stokes mortars and field guns, which usually had the effect of quietening the Germans down. At night, patrols were sent out to gauge the strength of the enemy's barbed wire and ascertain the number of garrisons he had along his front line. Sometimes, bombing expeditions were carried out late at night, in addition to the laying of more barbed wire in front of the Australian trenches. Things were much quieter at Ypres than at Pozieres. However, they could still be deadly. By 25 September, the battalion had lost six men killed and twenty-two wounded.

The troops were relieved on the twenty-fifth and travelled west to Brandhoek, near Poperinge. There they engaged in general cleaning, drilling and route marches, as well as sports competitions. They began travelling by foot and by train towards France again on 1 October, finally arriving back at Albert on the twenty-ninth. On that date, after much confusion, 6 Battalion moved into the front line at Guedecourt. The commander noted that the trenches they occupied were in a very bad state, parts of them containing mud that reached as high as the thighs. The weather, he noted, was very cold and very wet. The next day, the Germans put up a fairly constant barrage in and around Guedecourt. The shells, the fairly constant rain and the muddy conditions made it difficult for supply parties to move their goods forward. Other activities had to be stopped because of the poor state of the ground.

Whether Charles was a member of one of the supply parties we do not know. All his war record tells us is that he suffered wounds to both of his thighs at this time, probably caused by an exploding shell. He was evacuated to the St. John Ambulance Hospital at Etaples, near Boulogne. On 13 November, he was reported as 'seriously ill, now dangerously ill', and he died there on the twentieth of the month. He passed away four days before a note was sent to his father indicating that he was dangerously ill.

Charles was buried in the Etaples Military Cemetery.



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)



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