

Private Charles Ernest Wigg

Rod Martin



Mindful of the horrendous casualties in the battles at Fromelles and Pozières in mid-1916, the Australian government accepted the advice of General Birdwood, the overall Australian commander, and determined that the newly formed 3 Division would be given extensive training before going into action. Not for that division, as official historian Charles Bean notes, the experience of 4 and 5 Divisions which 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.’ Rather, the new recruits would be quickly transferred to England, join a training battalion at Lark Hill on Salisbury Plain, and spend almost three months there before heading to France.

And so it was for twenty-five year-old labourer Charles Wigg of Willow Street in Essendon. He joined up on 12 September 1916, was assigned to 4 Reinforcements of 38 Battalion, and sailed for England on 20 October on A17 HMAT *Port Lincoln*.



(<http://alh-research.tripod.com>)

To avoid German submarines in the Mediterranean, the ship sailed via the Cape of Good Hope to Sierra Leone. Once there, the men were transferred to another vessel and transported to Plymouth, Devon, arriving there on 29 December.

Once arrived at Lark Hill, the men received intensive instruction on the finer points of trench warfare from soldiers who had survived on the Western Front. Their divisional commander was Major-General John Monash. He was determined that they would be seen as an elite unit in the Australian Army. He even went to the extent of ordering them to wear their slouch hat brims flat instead of looped as in the other divisions to distinguish them from those other units. Bean records that the men themselves disliked this distinction, instead wanting to be accepted as comrades by the rest of the army. It was their fate, however, to be regarded as the pampered 'babies' of the AIF, and referred to derisively as the 'Lark Hill Lancers' or, most generally, as the 'Eggs-a-cook' (a term picked up from the cry of sellers of boiled eggs in Egypt) on account of their distinctive oval shoulder patches.

On 27 March 1917, the 38 Battalion reinforcements sailed for Boulogne on the coast of France. Once there, they headed for billets close to the town of Armentières. The front line near that town was considered to be a 'quiet' sector, a place where the soldiers could acclimatise themselves to the rigours and dangers of the Western Front, or retreat to for a well-deserved rest. On 6 April, the reinforcements were joined by the rest of 38 Battalion, which had marched in from southern Belgium. On 16 April, the reinforcements had their first taste of action when the battalion relieved 40 Battalion at Houplines, just north-east of Armentières. By the twenty-sixth, the unit was back in Armentières again, having been relieved in turn by the British 2/6 King's Own Liverpool Regiment.



38 Battalion men moving through Houplines, December 1916
(AWM E00106)

The next day, Charles was taken to hospital sick. The initial report indicated some problem with his face. Subsequently, however, he was reported as suffering from a disease in the

‘Rt. Antrim’. This writer can only find reference to the county of Antrim in Ireland. Therefore, he has assumed that the name of the real affliction was lost in transfer or translation. The closest interpretation he can come to is ‘right atrium’, the atrium being a chamber of the heart. Whatever the cause of the affliction, Charles was hospitalised until early May, spent a period of recuperation and then rejoined his unit on the twenty-fifth. By that time, it had moved north into Belgium and was based at Ploegsteert, not far from the town of Ypres. The Battle of the Somme, begun in July 1916, was well and truly over with no real achievement gained. The British commander-in-chief, Sir Douglas Haig, had shifted his attention to Belgium, specifically the heights overlooking Ypres and the German-held coastline that harboured enemy submarines. Haig felt that success in taking the heights and the coast would demoralise the Germans and remove a threat to the all-important convoys transporting food and war materiel from North America to Britain – and soon to transport American troops after that country had declared war against Germany the previous month. Troops and equipment were moved to the Ypres area, and a number of massive mines secretly set up in tunnels under the German lines.

When Charles arrived, 38 Battalion was holding a section of the front line in the St. Ives sector near Ploegsteert. On the twenty-eighth, 221 men were involved in a night time raid on the enemy’s lines. They entered a trench and captured a prisoner. However, it was at considerable cost. Thanks mainly to their own artillery firing short, they lost thirty men killed or missing and sixty-five wounded.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

H02096

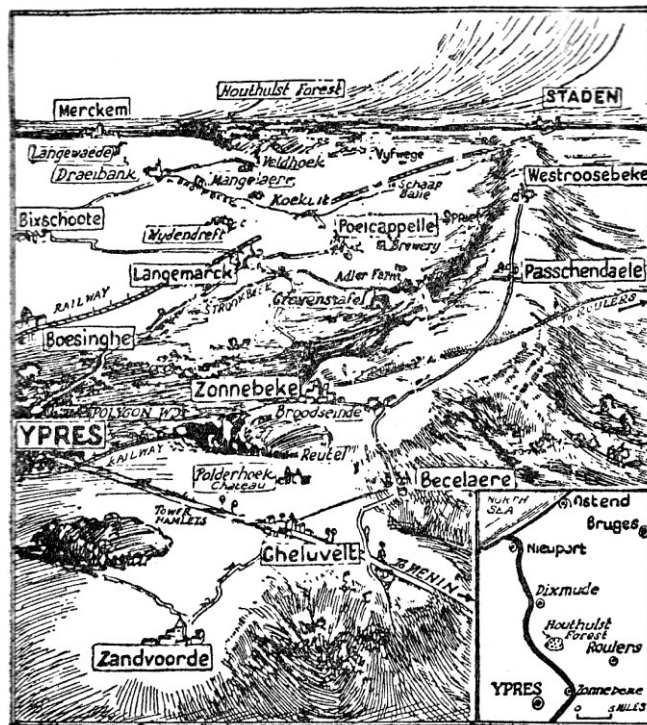
Communication trench, St Ives sector, Ploegsteert, 1917 (AWM H02096)

On 7 June, what was known officially as the Third Battle of Ypres (but often called Passchendaele – incorrectly) began when nineteen of those secretly buried mines were detonated under the German positions. 38 Battalion, which had been relieved since the second, marched towards the trenches again early on the seventh, and were hampered by

German gas shells. They finally reached the front line and went into attack in three waves. The mines had killed many Germans and destabilised the survivors, making the Battle of Messines Ridge a one-sided effort. For their part, the men of 38 Battalion achieved their designated objective very quickly, losing few casualties in the process. By 9 June, they had dug in along their line, and were then relieved for the rest of the month. They had wounds to lick. In just over four months, the battalion had lost 587 men killed, wounded or missing – more than half its full complement.

On 11 July, 38 Battalion went into support on Messines Ridge and stayed there until the twentieth, when it was relieved once more. By then the Germans had recovered from the shock and reorganised themselves, and sporadic action between them and the Allies took place on a daily basis. Although captured, Messines Ridge was a dangerous place to be.

The men stayed in reserve throughout August and September, recuperating and preparing for their next battle. That was to come on 4 October, the start of the so-called Phase Three of the Third Battle of Ypres. The first attack had not begun until 31 July, more than a month after the mining of Messines Ridge. That delay gave the Germans time to prepare for what they were convinced would be a major attack. When the troops finally went over the top, the weather broke and it began raining. Haig believed that his attack would succeed as long as the weather remained fine. Much of the Ypres area consists of previously drained marsh land. In company with the rain, the heavy shelling of the area destroyed the intricate drainage system and turned the battlefield into an almost impassable bog that consumed men, animals and machines in large numbers. These were the conditions in which 38 Battalion took its place near the Ypres-Zonnebeke Road on 2 October, ready to go into action in two days' time.



The Ypres area 1917

(Gibbs: *From Bapaume to Passchendaele*, 1918)

38 Battalion went into attack at 2 am on the morning of the fourth, the men following an effective creeping military barrage and overwhelming the enemy before they had a chance to regain their positions. 38 Battalion's objective was reached by 7.30 am. After facing some ineffective German counter-barrages during the day, the men were relieved that night and marched through Ypres towards Vlamertinghe.



Captain Frank Hurley's famous photograph of Australian troops marching through Ypres in 1917 (AWM E 04612)

On 12 October, along with other members of 3 Division, 38 Battalion was allotted the third and final objective: a line beyond the village of Passchendaele (the reason why the battle is often called by this name). The men went into attack at 10.45 pm on the night of the eleventh and suffered a considerable number of casualties from shellfire and, later, machine guns. The men did gain some ground, but casualties were so severe that by midday on the twelfth a retreat to the jumping off line was ordered. The troops consolidated their position there by around 3 pm. They stayed in that place until relieved on the night of the thirteenth.

The battalion suffered ninety-nine men missing (and presumed killed) during the attack. Charles was one of them. It was only later, in early 1918, that a report indicated that his body had actually been found and buried in the field, and he was declared officially dead by 3 Division. The reason for the delay in notification may well have been because his field grave had subsequently been destroyed by enemy shelling, so no record would have existed of him. It may be the case that he was buried in something similar to the makeshift cemetery pictured below. It was located just off the Ypres-Zonnebeke Road, not far from the battlefield.



(AWM C04580)

As he had no known grave, Charles was commemorated on the Menin Gate Memorial in Ypres.



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

Sources

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