

Gunner George Henry Creese

Rod Martin

At the age of forty-three, why did George Creese of Barnett Street, Kensington enlist in the Australian Imperial Force on 2 October 1916? He had what one presumes was a steady job as an attendant at the cordite factory in Maribyrnong and, at his age, he would not have been included in the call-up that was expected after the anticipated success of the upcoming plebiscite on conscription later that month. Perhaps he decided that it was the honourable thing to do, given that so many twenty-one to thirty-five year-old men would soon have no choice in the matter.* It may also be the case that, despite his age, he as a single man had received one or more white feathers – a symbol of cowardice - from young women. Alternatively, perhaps he was influenced by the horrific casualty figures that came out of the battles at Fromelles and Pozières two to three months earlier and decided that he had to do his bit for king and empire. Whatever the reason(s), George signed on the bottom line and was allocated to 4 Field Artillery Brigade. This may have been because he was considered too old to undergo the heavy demands placed on infantrymen. He was a medium-sized man (174 cm.) but rather dumpy (eighty-six kilos) and that could have influenced the recruiters. However, he may also have been assigned to the artillery because of his experience with explosives at the cordite factory.

George trained locally, at Maribyrnong, before embarking on RMS *Orontes* and sailing for England on 23 December 1916.



Orontes departing from Port Melbourne, 23 December 1916

(AWM PB0703)

*The nation's mood changed at the last moment and the plebiscite was lost.



Orontes leaves Port Melbourne, 23 December 1916

(AWM PB0693)

Travelling via the Cape of Good Hope to avoid German submarines in the Mediterranean, George and his compatriots arrived at Plymouth, Devon, on 17 February 1917. The men then travelled to Lark Hill on Salisbury Plain and underwent five months of intensive training. Finally, on 23 July, they travelled to Southampton and sailed for France.

Once in France, George was assigned to 2 Australian Light Trench Mortar Battery as one of the reinforcements. According to 2 LTM's war diary, the reinforcements reached the unit on 29 July when it was resting at St. Marie-Cappel, near Doulieu on the Somme. By this time, the Australian LTM batteries were using the Stokes light mortar. This weapon 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. Firing Stokes mortars was a dangerous occupation because of their need to be located close to the enemy trenches. The mortar bombs flew over a high and short trajectory, dropping almost vertically on the enemy. It stood to reason, then, that the enemy could try to do the same to the Australian gunners, or rake them with machine guns, or throw grenades. Enemy aircraft could also fly low and drop bombs. George would be in harm's way on many occasions.

The battery stayed at St. Marie-Cappel for the whole of August and into September. On the thirteenth of that month, it began moving north into Belgium, preparing to support men of 1 Division in a major attack at Menin Road, just outside the town of Ypres. The main attacks of the Third Battle of Ypres had begun on 31 July, the ostensible aims being, according to war correspondent Philip Gibbs, 'to turn the German flank from the Ypres salient [bulge in the front line], occupy the Belgian coast and capture the enemy's submarine pens [at Ostend and Zeebrugge]'. However, heavy rains and constant shelling had turned the naturally marshy land around Ypres into glutinous mud, bogging everything down.

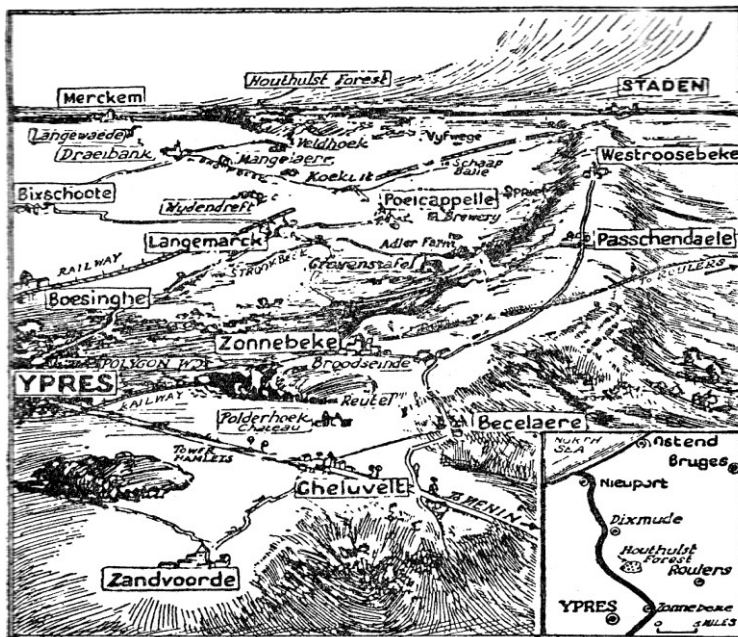


A Stokes mortar in the field

(AWM E01597)

By mid-September, Third Ypres had turned into yet another war of bloody attrition.

However, the Allies were learning from their previous disasters at Ypres in 1914 and 1915, and on the Somme in 1916. They had adopted a strategy called ‘bite and hold’ – the use of an effective preliminary barrage followed by a sudden attack on a small area of German-occupied line, and it was becoming very effective. On 20 September, 1 and 2 Australian Divisions were poised to attack at Menin Road. 2 LTM Battery was to provide support for the troops designated to attack the Germans in Glencorse Wood, just east of Ypres.



Glencorse Wood is near Polygon Wood. (Gibbs: *From Bapaume to Passchendaele*)

Some time during the attack, George was killed. There are no Red Cross reports on his death and his body was never found. The odds are that his post suffered a direct hit from a shell and he was either blown to pieces or buried by the debris of the blast.



The area near Ypres, 21 September 1917. Captured German pillboxes in the upper right-hand corner. (AWM E00909)

The attack at Menin Road was a success, the troops advancing about 1 200 metres. However, Australia suffered 5 000 casualties for a total gain of about nine square kilometres. It was not enough to win the war, which would go on for another ten months.

George's body was never found, so his details are inscribed on the Menin Gate Memorial in Ypres.



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

Initially, it was believed that his body had been discovered and buried in the large military cemetery at Tyne Cot, and his mother was informed of this. However, the claim was later retracted. Then he was thought to be buried at Chateau Wood, but this also turned out to be incorrect. Like many others, George had simply vanished.

Sources

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