

John Edwin Britnell



Sergeant (Sgt) 32 John Edwin Britnell enlisted in the 54th Battery in the Siege Artillery Brigade in Brisbane on 7 June 1915. He embarked overseas on 17 July and travelled via the Suez Canal to England, where he disembarked at Devonport on 23 August and joined the Siege Artillery Depot at Lydd, Kent.

The brigade, initially manned by Garrison Artillery soldiers, was organised into two batteries, the 54th and 55th, each equipped with four 8 inch Howitzers and 9.2 inch Howitzers respectively (increased to six in July 1917).

In early 1916, the brigade designation was changed to 36th Heavy Artillery Group (HAG) and they left England on 26 February 1916 and disembarked at Boulogne, France later the same day. They moved to billets at Beaumetz on 3 March and then into the front line for the first time at Tinques, to the west of Arras and Vimy on 14 March, where they came under the command of the British 17th Corps, and Sgt Britnell was promoted to Battery Quartermaster Sergeant (BQMS) on 1 April.

In early July, the 36th HAG moved south to the Somme region where they came under the control of the British 10th Corps. They established their batteries around Aveluy and registered their guns on Pozieres and Thiepval and, on 23 July, they fired in support of Australian infantry for the first time in the war when the 1st Division attacked and captured Pozieres. They remained in this area, supporting Australian, British and Canadian infantry, for the next eight months.

BQMS Britnell was promoted to Battery Sergeant Major (BSM) on 16 December and then transferred to the 55th Battery on 31 December 1916.

Following the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line, the 36th HAG moved to Sapignies, north of Bapaume, in mid-March 1917, where they fired on Bullecourt. By early April the battery was operating near Athies, on the Arras front.

BSM Britnell was granted leave in England from 2 – 15 June 1917 and then attached to Brigade Headquarters from 9 – 22 September.

In late September, the battery moved to Voormezele and fired on Passchendaele Ridge several times during the month, and on 1 October 1917, German aircraft bombed the 55th Battery's position and caused 18 casualties.

With the conclusion of Third Ypres, the situation quietened down somewhat and BSM Britnell was promoted to Second Lieutenant (2nd Lt) on 1 December 1917 then granted leave in England from 15 – 30 January 1918.

The designation of the unit was changed to 36th Heavy Artillery Brigade (HAB) on 5 February and 2nd Lt Britnell was further promoted to Lieutenant (Lt) on 1 March, then attended a pigeon course from 17 – 20 March.

On 9 April 1918, the Germans commenced the second phase of their Spring Offensive, this time near Armentieres, and the 36th HAB was involved in continuous defensive fire around Messines, Ploegsteert Wood and Neuve Eglise between 9 – 18 April, when the main threat ended. The unit then remained in the north throughout May – September, during which time Lt Britnell was detached to the 2nd Army Artillery School from 5 – 16 June.

He was granted leave in England between 14 September – 1 October, by which time the heavy artillery operations had wound down as it became obvious a major German withdrawal was underway. The unit advanced east and when the armistice was declared on 11 November, they had reached Tourcoing, on the Belgian border.

After the war ended, Lt Britnell was granted further leave in England from 11 February – 11 March 1919, during which time he married Miss Florence Braund in Taunton, Somerset on 17 February.

He left France for the last time on 5 May and was seconded to the Australian War Records Section in London from 9 – 21 May, then embarked for return to Australia, with his wife, on 16 June.

Lieutenant John Edwin Britnell disembarked in Melbourne on 1 August, where his appointment as a commissioned officer in the AIF was terminated on 30 September 1919.

Name: Britnell, John Edwin	
Service Number	32
Date enlisted	7 June 1915
Place enlisted	Brisbane, Queensland
Rank on enlistment	Sergeant
Initial Unit	Siege Artillery Brigade
Previous military service	Royal Australian Garrison Artillery – 7 years (serving)
Date and ship embarked for overseas	17 July 1915 HMAT A67 <i>Orsova</i>
Stated age/DOB (if known)	27 years (7/7/1888)
Place of birth	Ballarat, Victoria
Marital status	Single
Occupation	Professional soldier
Religion	Methodist
Next of kin and address	Britnell, Mr Robert, father, 28 Otway Street, Ballarat East, Victoria
Permanent address	Victoria Barracks, Brisbane, Qld
Appearance	Fair complexion, dark brown hair, blue eyes, height – 5 feet 8 inches, chest measurement – 39/41 inches
Final Rank	Lieutenant
Final Unit	36 th Heavy Artillery Brigade
Theatres of war served in	France, Belgium
Fate	Returned to Australia
Date and ship embarked for Australia	16 June 1919 (with wife) HT <i>Ormonde</i>
Date discharged	30 September 1919
Nature of discharge	Appointment Terminated
Honours/medals	British War Medal, Victory Medal
Notes	Serving at Fort Queenscliff in 1913. Married Florence Braund in Taunton, Somerset on 17 February 1919. Continued in RAGA (Qld) until 1924. Died 12 January 1967. Also remembered on the Ballarat Arch of Victory & Avenue of Honour and Thursday Island Roll of Honor.