

Francis George Stephens



Private (Pte) 2528 Francis George Stephens enlisted in the 59th Infantry Battalion in the 15th Infantry Brigade of the 5th Australian Division in Queenscliff on 22 May 1916. He embarked overseas on 25 September and disembarked in Plymouth on 11 November, where he joined the 15th (Brigade) Training Battalion at Hurdcott Camp in Wiltshire.

He left England on 16 January 1917 and landed in France the next day, where he was taken on strength of the 59th Battalion, in the field near Flers, on 22 January.

Following the German withdrawal to their new defences on the Hindenburg Line in late March, the 59th Battalion entered the line to defend newly captured territory near Bullecourt between 10 – 13 May 1917, during which time they sustained 137 casualties, one of whom was Pte Stephens who sustained a shrapnel wound to his left eye. He was treated at the 22nd General Hospital at Camiers between 14 – 17 May and rejoined the battalion on 8 June.

The battalion spent several weeks resting in the Sercus area during August and September (where Pte Stephens was also promoted to Lance Corporal (L/Cpl) on 17 August) then moved into Belgium in late September.

By 25 September the battalion had reached Westhoek Ridge and then, at 5.50am on 26 September they participated in the 4th and 5th Division's successful attack on Polygon Wood. The 59th Battalion suffered 268 casualties in the attack, including 68 men killed or missing.

Back in camp following the action, L/Cpl Stephens was further promoted to Corporal (Cpl) on 7 October. Three days later the battalion was involved in salvage work in front of the Ypres Canal when Cpl Stephens sustained a shrapnel wound to his left leg on 10 October.

He was evacuated to the 24th General Hospital at Etaples from 11 – 15 October. After spending several weeks at various convalescent depots, he rejoined the 59th Battalion, out of the line and resting at Lindenhoeke, on 26 November. He was then granted leave in England from 31 January – 18 February 1918.

Following news of the German breakthrough on the Somme in late March, the battalion was on the march from Meteren to Bailleul when a single German shell landed among them and wounded seven men, one of whom was Cpl Stephens who was gassed on 24 March. He was admitted to the 7th General Hospital at St Omer between 26 March – 9 April, then rejoined the battalion, which had moved south and was fighting near Villers-Bretonneux, on 26 April.

On 4 July, during the attack on le Hamel to the south, the 15th Brigade, including the 59th Battalion, was involved in a feint north of the Somme at Ville sur Ancre. The battalion achieved all their objectives for the loss of 65 casualties (16 killed).

Cpl Stephens was seconded for duty with the 4th (British) Army Scouting Observation & Sniping School from 13 July – 2 August, when he returned to the 59th Battalion.

During the allies' August offensive from Amiens, the 5th Division (which included the 59th Battalion) "passed through" the 3rd Division and continued the advance for several kilometres, capturing the villages of Harbonnieres and Vauvillers on 9 August, for the loss of 110 battalion casualties, one of whom was Cpl Stephens, who received shrapnel wounds to his back and right thigh on 8 August.

He was initially evacuated to the 2nd Canadian Stationary Hospital at Outreau on 10 August, then transferred to England where he was admitted to the Edmonton Military Hospital from 12 – 28 August.

He was moved to the 3rd Auxiliary Hospital at Dartford from 28 August – 30 September and then transferred to the No. 2 Convalescent Depot at Weymouth, where he spent the remainder of the war.

Corporal 2528 Francis George Stephens embarked for Australia on 8 November 1918 and disembarked in Melbourne on 29 December, where he was medically discharged from the AIF on 2 February 1919.

Name: Stephens, Francis George	
Service Number	2528
Date enlisted	22 May 1916
Place enlisted	Queenscliff, Victoria
Rank on enlistment	Private
Initial Unit	59 th Infantry Battalion
Date and ship embarked for overseas	25 September 1916 HMAT A9 <i>Shropshire</i>
Previous military service	Senior cadets and 69 th Infantry Battalion (CMF)
Stated age/DOB (if known)	19 years 2 months (9/2/1897)
Place of birth	Point Lonsdale, Victoria
Marital status	Single
Occupation	Student
Religion	Methodist
Next of kin and address	Stephens, Mr George, father, Hobson Street, Queenscliff, Victoria
Permanent address	Hobson Street, Queenscliff, Victoria
Appearance	Fresh complexion, brown hair, blue eyes, height – 5 feet 9 ³ / ₄ inches, weight – 7 stone, 12 lbs, chest measurement – 31/34 inches
Final Rank	Corporal
Final Unit	59 th Infantry Battalion
Theatres of war served in	France, Belgium
Fate	Returned to Australia
Date and place wounded	13 May 1917 – Bullecourt, France
Nature of wounds	Shrapnel wound to left eye
Date and place wounded (2)	10 October 1917 – Ypres, Belgium
Nature of wounds (2)	Shrapnel wound to left leg
Date and place wounded (3)	24 March 1918 – near Bailleul, France
Nature of wounds (3)	Gassed
Date and place wounded (4)	8 August 1918 – Harbonnieres, France
Nature of wounds (4)	Shrapnel wound to back and right thigh
Date and ship embarked for Australia	8 November 1918 HMHS <i>Gaika</i>
Date discharged	2 February 1919
Nature of discharge	Medically Unfit (wounds)
Honours/medals	British War Medal, Victory Medal
Notes	Also remembered on the Borough of Queenscliffe Roll of Honor.