

Corporal Frederick Bernard Nash

Rod Martin



Providing written consent from his parents, nineteen year-old Bernard Nash (as it would seem he preferred to be called) enlisted in the AIF on 8 July 1915. He was one of a record 36 575 that month, a number that rose from a rather paltry 6 250 in April and was still only 12 505 in June. By July, however, in response to the mixed messages coming out of Gallipoli, the growing casualty lists in the newspapers, a liberalisation of the eligibility criteria for selection and a spirited propaganda campaign by the federal government, young and more not-do-young men rushed to the recruiting offices.



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Bernard was a farmer by trade. That may be the reason why he had no military training in senior cadets. The pencilled-in note on his enlistment form - 'exempt area' – may be the explanation for that. He hailed originally from 25 Keilor Road in Essendon, but where he was farming at the time of his enlistment is not known. The evidence in his military file indicates that, although he originally signed up on 8 July, the enlistment papers were not signed and endorsed in Melbourne until the thirteenth. As his parents' written permission was dated that same day, it could be assumed that he initially signed up in the country, travelled to Melbourne to obtain the permission and then attended a Melbourne recruiting office with his incomplete attestation papers.

Bernard was assigned to A Company, 29 Battalion and did his training at Seymour. On 10 November that year, along with his comrades, he boarded A11 HMA T *Ascanius* and sailed for the Middle East.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

PB0127

(AWM PB0127)

Bernard arrived at Suez on 7 December, just before the final evacuation of Gallipoli, and then probably proceeded to the new Australian training base at Tel el Kebir, on the edge of the desert. Being in 29 Battalion, he was assigned to 5 Division, 2 Anzac Corps, and stayed in Egypt until the following June. During that time, he and his comrades helped to defend the Suez Canal from possible Turkish attacks and trained in preparation for following 1 Anzac Corps to the Western Front in France (those men had departed in March). Part of the training, under the leadership of Major-General James McCay, was a march of sixty-four kilometres from Tel el Kebir to the Suez Canal, complete with weaponry and full packs (twenty-seven kilograms). Tramping through sand in the heat of the desert, many men dropped out and a small number died of heat exhaustion. For this insane order, McCay gained the reputation of the most hated general in the AIF. We can assume that Bernard participated in this ordeal. Fortunately for him, he survived.

2 Anzac Corps began moving towards the Western Front in June 1916. Bernard left Egypt on the sixteenth of the month and arrived in Marseilles on the twenty-third. As

had happened with the men of 1 Anzac Corps who preceded them, the troops were assigned to spots in the so-called Nursery Sector, near Armentières in northern France. This relatively quiet sector of the front was selected so that the men could adjust to the demands of a modern industrial war without being in too much danger. However, they arrived at just the wrong time. Initially based at Hazebrouck, on 8 July the men were ordered to march south-east to Estaires, a distance of almost twenty-six kilometres – while carrying equipment weighing thirty-four kilograms. The battalion commander wrote in the war diary that A Company (Bernard's company) had to march an extra five kilometres just to reach the starting point. As a result, several of the men were '*knocked out*' and had to be collected that night, presumably by truck. The commander also noted that most of those men were aged between nineteen and twenty-two years of age – Bernard's category.

Continuing to march the next day, the battalion reached Bois Grenier on 10 July and occupied the front trenches there. It lost its first man only twenty-four hours later when, at night, Private Cochrane and an officer went into No Man's Land between the opposing trenches to retrieve a German flag. The officer was wounded and Cochrane killed by machine gun fire. By the fourteenth, when it was relieved, the battalion had lost two men killed and thirteen wounded – and this in a supposedly 'quiet' sector. However, far worse was to come.

On 15 July, the battalion moved to the village of Fleurbaix – just across No Man's Land from the German-held settlement of Fromelles. Until recently, 1 Anzac Corps had been based at Fleurbaix, but had been called south-east to the Somme Valley to provide support for the British and French offensive in that area, which had begun on the first day of the month. It was destined to be used in an attempt to capture the village of Pozières and the ridge behind it that would, hopefully, lead to the capture of the fortified settlement of Thiepval. When 2 Anzac Corps took over Fleurbaix, its commanders were probably informed about a plan to provide a feint at Fromelles to prevent the German troops there from moving to the Somme to reinforce their beleaguered comrades. Now, despite the corps having been in France for only a very short time, the men were to be thrown into battle. The plan was to attack across No Man's Land and seize a fortified German salient (bulge) called the sugarloaf. This would then allow the troops to penetrate further into German-held territory. The problem was that the plan made some gross assumptions regarding what the men could achieve. The biggest one by far was that the men of 15 Brigade could successfully cross more than 400 yards of flat, shell-pocked and barbed wire-strewn land, including a stream, in the face of German machine guns and shells and then capture the redoubt. The brigade commander, Pompey Elliott, saw the foolishness of this plan and protested as loudly as he could about it. However, the British officer in charge, General Haking (forever afterwards known as 'Butcher Haking') insisted on the attack going ahead. On the evening of 19 July, the men of 1 Anzac Corps moved into No Man's Land. While a few actually did reach the Sugarloaf, most were mowed down long before. As the survivors and wounded staggered back next morning, Pompey comforted them, tears streaming down his face.

29 Battalion, as part of 5 Division's 8 Brigade, flanked the attack by 15 Brigade. At 8.00pm on 19 July, the men of A and D companies were ordered to carry bombs and stores to the front trenches. By 11.00 pm two of the companies were in No Man's Land. Fortunately for some of them, the distance they had to cover to the German lines was nowhere near as far as 15 Brigade's task. However, they still did not make

it. At 2.00am, the Germans counter-attacked. With the Australian line retreating, the other companies were drawn into the fight, and the whole battalion was engaged. After a struggle in No Man's Land, the Germans retreated to their trenches. The remnants of 29 Battalion remained in the front line, holding up to more than 900 metres of it while large numbers of wounded were brought back by day and by night. The men stayed there until 31 July, carrying out repairs to parapets, wires and saps, rebuilding shelled dugouts and recovering stores from No Man's Land. Meanwhile, the Germans continued to pepper the troops with shell and shot. By the time the battalion was relieved on the thirty-first, it had lost nineteen men killed, 151 wounded and sixty-six missing. – a total of 236. One member of the battalion summed up the battle thus:

The novelty of being a soldier wore off in about five seconds, it was like a bloody butcher's shop.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E04037

Remnants of shell- and bullet-torn kits of 5 Division troops involved in the attack at Fromelles (AWM E04037)

5 Division suffered 5 533 casualties at Fromelles and was devastated. Richard Travers tells us that the loss was so bad that the authorities concealed what was to become Australia's greatest single loss of soldiers in one day. It was so bad that the division was effectively withdrawn from direct conflict for the remainder of the year so that it could lick its wounds and recuperate. For its part, the remains of 29 Battalion were billeted at nearby Bac sur Maur and spent the whole of the next month helping to rebuild the old front line, digging deep dugouts and undergoing training. Between the middle and end of the month, they also took turns in the front line.

On 21 September, the battalion moved back to the area around Armentières, recuperating and receiving reinforcements. The men were required to man the front line at Houplines and lost two men killed and thirty-five wounded – making a total of 323 for the previous two months – one-third of the total complement. Over the next three months, the battalion moved around northern France, sometimes relieving other groups in the front line, but not being involved in any major conflicts.

By October, the weather in northern France was deteriorating, presaging what was to be described as the worst European winter in forty years. In late November, the men were based at Trones Wood, north of the Somme. A and B companies were in the front line, quite possibly standing in cold mud up to their calves. When they were relieved on the twenty-sixth, Bernard was obviously in difficulty because he was evacuated to hospital two days later, suffering from ‘chilled feet’. Had he continued in the trenches, the diagnosis may have changed to ‘trench foot’, a condition caused by standing in cold mud for hours on end, leading to poor circulation, numbness, blisters, necrosis and gangrene. The affliction led to the hospitalisation of many soldiers, and some died from it. It may be that a doctor saw where Bernard’s problem was heading and decided to cut it off at the pass.

Bernard was in hospital until 11 December. On the twenty-ninth of the month, he was attached to 2 Anzac Corps at Bailleul as ‘permanent base personnel’. Unfortunately, his war record gives no indication of what he did while in this role. It may well be that he was still recovering from his affliction, and was kept away from the front during the very cold weather to enable him to do so in a proper manner. Whatever, he returned to 29 Battalion on 6 March 1917 and was promoted to the rank of lance-corporal.,

At that time, the men had just been relieved and were in reserve at Trones Wood. They were engaged in cleaning arms, equipment and clothing.



Trones Wood 1917. The area had been devastated during a battle the year before.
(AWM H08776)

On 20 March, after a short stint in support trenches, the battalion moved to Bapaume and occupied part of the line there. On the twenty-second, it was in action, repelling a German counter-attack in the early hours of the next morning. The Germans suffered heavy losses, leaving several wounded men to be taken prisoner. That night, the troops were relieved and then became engaged in digging strong points along the line near Bancourt. Most of the following six weeks would be taken up with training, fatigues (general duties) and drills. Their men were based at a camp at Bazentin-le-Grand and then moved on to Lagnicourt in early May – just a few kilometres south-east of Bullecourt. A disastrous assault had been carried out there in the previous month. Having no preliminary bombardment, and using three tanks to plough their way through the German wire(!), the attack cost 3 000 Australian casualties, including 1 300 taken prisoner. The tanks were destroyed very early in the process. Not to be discouraged, the British high command planned a second attack, this time employing a bombardment. 5 Division, now having recovered from the mauling at Fromelles, was slated to relieve 1 and 2 Divisions after they had started the attack on 3 May. On the twelfth, the men went into action, weathering a strong German counter-attack and maintaining a foothold in the supposedly impregnable Hindenburg (Siegfried) Line, to which the Germans had withdrawn three months earlier. For its part, 29 Battalion relieved a British battalion in the front line on 12 May and stayed there until the twenty-first. The unit's war diary indicates that the Germans were relatively quiet in this sector, so losses among the ranks were minimal.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E04580

The ruins of Lagnicourt Church, destroyed during the First Battle of Bullecourt, April 1917 (AWM E04580)

The battle ended on 17 May. The battalion was relieved on the twenty-first and stayed in the area, occupying support trenches as a reserve battalion. It marched to Bapaume on 25 May and the men rested there. However, they were not out of the conflict. On the twenty-seventh the Germans began shelling the town. One billet was hit, causing minor casualties, and one man sustained a broken arm. By the end of the month, 29 Battalion had been spared most of the horrors of the previous year. No soldiers had been killed, but one man had subsequently died of his wounds. Fifteen had been wounded in all, and one man was missing.

The men spent June and July training at Bapaume, Senlis and Millencourt before transferring to the Blaringhem area in Nord-pas-de-Calais, not far from the Belgian border, at the end of the month. They carried on with the training for the next month and a half before moving to the area near Ypres on 17 September. The Third Battle of Ypres, often referred to incorrectly as 'Passchendaele', had begun on 31 July, and was presaged by heavy rain, turning the notoriously swampy area in southern Belgium into an almost impassable bog. Men, horses and materiel disappeared into the morass at an alarming rate. On 20 September, during a break in the weather, 1 and 2 Divisions carried out a successful attack near the Menin Road, pushing the Germans back to the nearby Polygon Wood. It was a true 'bite and hold' operation, deliberately limited in scope, but very successful because of the meticulous planning by British General Herbert Plumer and Major-General John Monash. The cost was high, however. The two divisions suffered a total of 5 000 casualties. On the twenty-sixth of the month, it was 4 and 5 Division's and 29 Battalion's turn. Another 'bite and hold' attack was planned, this time to take Polygon Wood, the so-called Butte (a mound about ten metres high that once was part of a target range), and a section of the German 'Flanders 1' line. This would facilitate a later attack towards the village of Broodseinde. After a carefully planned preliminary barrage, the men were to attack and penetrate about 1 100 metres on a front 1 500 – 2 000 metres wide. Official historian Charles Bean tells us that, having been rested for four months, 5 Division was to undertake the more difficult task of taking the main ridge. When they went over the top, preceded by a creeping barrage described by Bean as "the most perfect that ever protected Australian troops", the men advanced quickly. The vista that presented itself to them was a desolate one. Once a leafy wood that had contained an army training ground, the rifle range and a racecourse surrounded by fir saplings, the area now, as described by Lieutenant Sinclair Hunt of 55 Battalion, was "a forest of charred and splintered stumps standing about three or four feet high" amidst thick undergrowth, craters and pillboxes, with the Butte at the far end giving the Germans unbroken views. Despite the Germans' natural advantages, the Australians prevailed and captured the Butte by 5.25 am. Other troops then went past them and moved ahead, making for the Flanders 1 line. They captured a section of the line, and all men then dug in, waiting for a counter-attack from the Germans. There was some opposition, mainly from machine guns and German pill boxes (fortified posts). However, no major attack occurred, and the newly occupied positions were held, along with 200 prisoners and thirty-four machine guns.

For its part in the attack, 29 Battalion began moving to nearby Hooge on the evening of 25 September, marching all night to arrive there in time to approach its starting off point at 4.24 in the morning. The Germans obviously knew that a 'stunt' was in the making, because they bombarded the men with gas shells while they were laying there. They finally joined in the attack on the wood at 5.50 am, but were held up because the brigade on their right had not advanced. The battalion commander decided, as a result, to remain stationary rather than expose his troops to an unprotected flank. The men finally began to advance towards the Butte at 12.00 noon and the objective was taken just one hour later.



The Butte, Polygon Wood. Note the crosses marking the graves of Australian soldiers.
(AWM J06406)

In the unit's war diary, the commander recorded that the

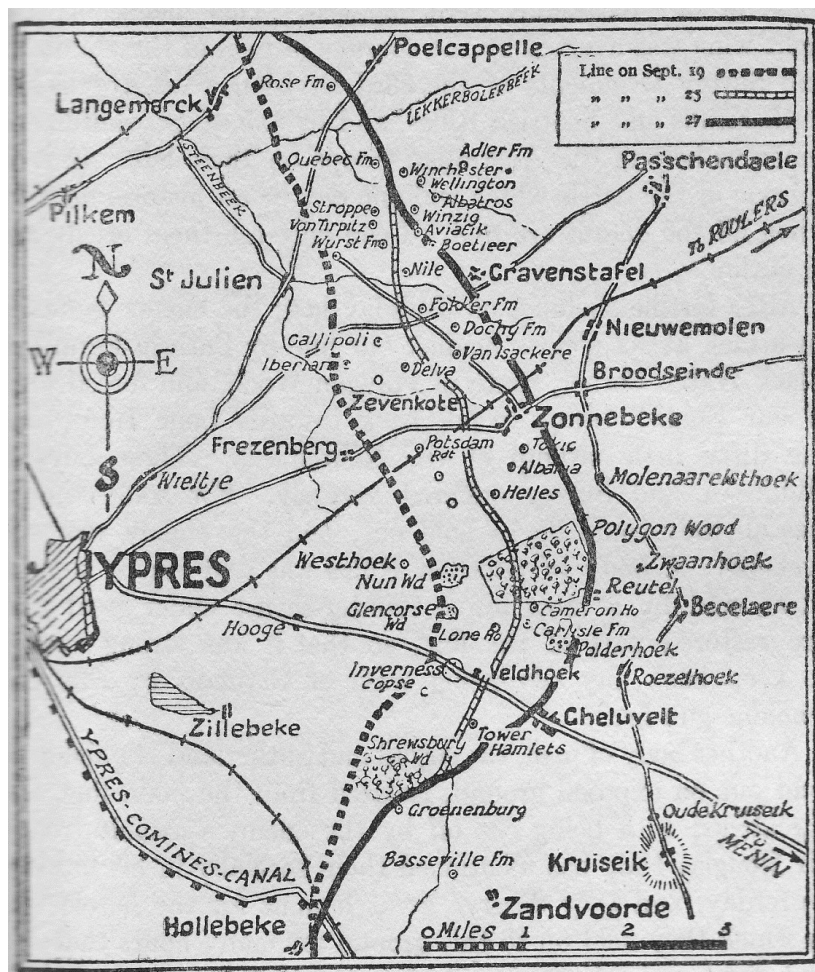
. . . Enemy did not show much fight and surrendered freely. About 170 prisoners and 30 machine guns captured.

Between 2.00 and 6.20 pm on the twenty-seventh, the Germans made a number of counter-attacks at regular intervals, but all were repulsed. Polygon Wood was another triumph for Plumer and Monash.

29 Battalion was relieved on 27 September and went into reserve at Dickebusch on the thirtieth. During the month it lost forty-two killed, 194 wounded and twenty missing. Fortunately for him, Bernard seemed to have survived unscathed. However, he must have showed continuing promise as a leader for, on 7 October, while in reserve in the Wippenhoek area, he was promoted to the rank of corporal. The hitherto fine weather broke that same day, heavy rain once more setting in over the battlefield. The battalion moved to Molenaarelst, on the edge of the salient (bulge in the line), east of Ypres, on 9 October. That evening, the Germans began systematically bombarding the area, an action that continued for the next four days, with periodic responses by the Allied artillery, only brought to a halt by the onset of very heavy rain on the thirteenth. On the same day, 29 Battalion was relieved and marched west to Ypres through a heavy hailstorm. If the men thought they were going into reserve they were sadly mistaken. They moved instead to Westhoek ridge, arriving on 17 October, and immediately came under heavy shellfire.



Captain Frank Hurley's iconic photo of Australian troops marching past the ruins of the Cloth Hall, Ypres, in October 1917. (AWM E 04612)



Gibbs: *From Bapaume to Passchendaele 1917*)

for the next several hours the men were subjected to heavy shellfire from the Germans, which was only subdued by heavy rain in the early hours of 18 October. Later in the day they moved to the Chateau Segard area near Ypres, where they rested. They were still not out of danger, however. The war diary records that, during the night of 20-21 October, enemy aircraft were active overhead and long-range shells fell near the camp. On the twenty-first, they left the camp and moved back to Molenaarelst in order to relieve another battalion in the front line. On the way, they had to pass through two heavy enemy barrages and suffered a number of casualties. By 5-40 pm the relief was complete and A and D companies were in the front line. At this time, the battalion's numbers were down to 355.

From then to 25 October, with rain falling around them on a regular basis, the men were subjected to heavy barrages on a continuing basis. They were finally relieved on that date and moved over very muddy roads to a camp near Ouderdom. There they rested and refitted before beginning training on the last day of October. The battalion's casualties for the month were twenty-three dead and eighty-six wounded. Significantly, fifty men were sent to hospital with sickness. The terrible conditions at the front, with regular rain, increasingly cold temperatures and appallingly muddy trenches undoubtedly contributed to the situation.

29 Battalion did not enter the front line again until 21 November, at Gapaard, north-west of Ypres. This time, Bernard's A company was in reserve. The men in the line immediately came under enemy fire – shells mortars and machine guns. This went on until the twenty-fifth, when A and B companies moved into the front line. They stayed there until the evening of 28 November, when they were relieved. The battalion then moved to Wulverghem to rest and Bernard's company had a no doubt welcome bath on the last day of the month.

On 7 December, the battalion moved back to Gapaard via Messines, and A and D companies immediately moved into the front line. They were relieved after three days of continual combat and Bernard and his comrades went into reserve – but only until the fourteenth, when they went back to the front line. On 16 December, with light snow falling, the battalion was relieved and moved back to Wulverghem. However, while on the way, a number of men were wounded by an enemy shell bursting in a gum boot store. All members of A company headquarters were injured and a captain later died of his wounds. On the seventeenth, the men arrived at Desvres, south-east of Boulogne, and rested there before beginning a training regimen that lasted until the end of the month. Christmas Day was appropriately seasonal, heavy snow falling that night.

On 31 December 1917, Bernard left for England. He had been temporarily transferred to 8 Training Battalion at Codford, the purpose probably being to complete an instructor's course and then train troops in the use of the Lewis light machine gun. Bernard attended the training course at Tidworth from 1 February to the nineteenth, and then moved to 15 Training Battalion. He worked there until 1 June, when he returned to 29 Battalion in France.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E00740

Firing a Lewis Gun at enemy aircraft, Ypres salient, September 1917 (AWM E00740)

At that time, the battalion was in reserve at Rivery, just east of the important railway junction of Amiens, on the Somme. Whether he arrived in time to participate in A company's success in the aquatic carnival on 8 June we do not know. What we do know is that, in Bernard's absence, the battalion had been involved in resisting Germany's last great attack on the Somme in March, and was in the process of re-equipping prior to taking the offensive. On 14 June, the men moved east to a reserve position north of Vaux-sur-Somme. However, it was not a quiet spot. The German artillery was active and their aircraft were roaming the skies. On occasions, gas shells were fired in the direction of the men, and the enemy machine guns were in constant use.

On the night of 26 June, the battalion was relieved and marched to a position north-west of Bonnay, the men taking up residence in a number of dugouts. The war diary notes that these had been sprayed, as influenza was becoming prevalent. This was the time of the Spanish 'Flu pandemic, which eventually killed up to 100 million people worldwide by 1920. The army was taking no chances with the health of its soldiers. The troops trained until 17 July, and then moved east to a more active zone at Morlancourt. There the men took turns in the front line, as well as being involved in digging saps (concealed trenches) towards the enemy lines. Something big was obviously on the way!

On 1 August 1918 the battalion was relieved and moved by bus to Cardonette, just north of Amiens. Once there, the men were involved in cleaning arms, ammunition and equipment. On the fourth, they moved to a spot just north of the village of Villers-Bretonneux, which had become famous the previous Anzac Day when a brilliant counter-move by Australian forces recaptured the village from the Germans, who had occupied it the previous day. 29 Battalion was slated to attack east from Villers-Bretonneux on the eighth, which had been designated as the first day of the allied offensive. At 5.35 am on 8 August, the men moved forward in heavy fog, the

companies having, as a result, to operate independently of each other, rather than in formation. The commanding officer recorded in the war diary:

The afternoon was most interesting on account of the many tanks and armoured cars moving in front and the large number of prisoners being marched back. A large quantity of enemy materials of all descriptions was collected.

The commander also reported that his men were in 'excellent spirits' and they settled down for the night, having seized a sizeable portion of formerly enemy territory.

The next day, however, was more difficult. The Germans provided a tenacious resistance, using bombardments and machine guns to hold up the advance. It was sometime during the ninth that Bernard was wounded in the groin. He was taken to a field hospital and from there, four days later, transported across the English Channel to Yorks House Hospital in Folkestone. It was the last he would see of the war.

Bernard's wound was obviously serious, as he was not discharged from hospital until March the following year. He stayed in England for a while and he was then repatriated, arriving back in Melbourne on 16 May 1919. His record indicates that he was finally discharged from the army on 8 July 1920. He had fought the good fight.

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