

Private Cyril Thomas Brackley Iles

Rod Martin



Law clerk Cyril Iles was a very slight young man, only nineteen years old in 1915. Had he tried to enlist a year earlier he would probably have been rejected because his chest measurement was too small: thirty-three inches expanded. A year after war was declared, however, the army authorities had liberalised the entrance requirements in order to replace those lost in the first weeks at Anzac Cove. An intensive propaganda campaign after the Gallipoli landing caused many young men to sign up, and the July enrolment figures (36, 575) were the greatest ones achieved. After that time, bad news from Gallipoli, indicated especially by the growing lists of casualties published in the newspapers, led to a severe decline in the numbers of men recruited.

However, Cyril was there, having enlisted on 12 July. Weighing only fifty-four kilos, and standing 171 centimetres, he would have looked very much like a boy in his uniform. Nevertheless, the young man was obviously keen to do his duty. He was assigned to 5 Reinforcements of 23 Infantry Battalion. He trained at Broadmeadows and sailed on RMS *Osterley* on 29 September.



RMS *Osterley* in February 1917

(AWM PB0793)

We know from Cyril's rather scant war record that he sailed to Egypt and was based at the new camp at Tel el Kebir by 11 January 1916. He would have joined in the punishing drills, including long route marches through the desert, digging trenches and defending the Suez Canal from an anticipated attack by the Turks. Meanwhile, 23 Battalion, recently returned from Gallipoli, was being replenished with equipment and new troops such as Cyril preparatory to sailing for the Western Front.

The battalion sailed from Alexandria on 20 March, arriving in Marseilles on the twenty-sixth. The men then entrained, probably in horse cars, and travelled north to Wittes, in the Armentières area in the north of the country. The new Australian troops were being based there because it was the so-called nursery sector, a relative quiet part of the front where they could acclimatise themselves to the realities of modern industrial warfare without being placed in too much danger. The battalion was in reserve until 10 April, when it moved to Fleurbaix, near Fromelles, and took over from 16 Royal Scots Regiment. Its first man was killed the very next day.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P00437.017

The front line at Fleurbaix, probably in 1916

(AWM P00437.017)

23 Battalion went into reserve on 16 April but, even then, it suffered a casualty on the seventeenth. Nowhere was really safe on the Western Front. It returned to the front line on 21 April in heavy rain, experiencing slight sniper and machine gun fire. The commander noted in the war diary that the rain left 'the communication trenches in bad state. 1 foot of water over duckboards numerous places.' In the next few days, the men experienced shelling and attacks from German aeroplanes. The Australian guns fired in return, and some of the men were sent out at night to reconnoitre No Man's Land between the front lines. This activity continued until the twenty-ninth, when the battalion went into reserve at Fort Rompu.

Cyril and his companions spent the whole of May in reserve, performing various tasks, and did not return to the front line until 10 June. This time it was at Rue de Bois, south of Armentières. It stayed there until the twenty-first of the month, when it moved back into the nearby trenches. Even when in reserve, troops could still be used for special purposes. This happened to some of the 23 Battalion men on the morning of 30 June. 252 troops from 21, 22, 23 and 24 Battalions were assigned to a raiding party. They penetrated the German line in three places, some of them having difficulty because the regular bombardments of No Man's Land had not cut the enemy

barbed wire. They stayed in the enemy trenches for eight minutes and did considerable damage, killing eighty Germans and taking five prisoners. 23 Battalion casualties were one killed, four wounded and one missing.

The men took over the trenches again at the beginning of July, and stayed there until relieved on the fourth. That day was particularly painful for the unit, as it lost five men killed and eighteen wounded. It then entrained for Steenwerk, west of Armentières, before moving to Ailly on the Somme River mid-month. The greatest battle of the war - the Battle of the Somme - had commenced on 1 July. Despite horrendous losses in the British ranks, some territory had been gained, and British commander-in-chief Sir Douglas Haig was keen to maintain the momentum. 2 Australian Division, including 23 Battalion, was slated to carry out an attack on the ruined village of Pozières with the aim of capturing the strategic ridge behind it. Success in this venture, thought Haig, would then allow an attack on the fortified village of Thiepval.

The battalion moved towards Pozières on 26 July. 1 Division had begun the initial attack three days earlier, and had gained a foothold in the village. In doing so, however, it had suffered 5285 casualties, and it was relieved by 2 Division on 25 July. 23 Battalion was probably a little late on the scene because it was ordered to be in reserve. On the twenty-eighth, it moved up to the front line in anticipation of an attack on the site of the Pozières windmill at the top of the ridge. At midnight that day, the first wave of men moved forward while being bombarded with shrapnel. The battalion attacked for eleven hours and gained a small amount of territory, but was unable to take the windmill site. In those eleven hours, 23 Battalion lost sixty-two missing, thirty-three killed and 231 wounded.

On 30 August, the men went into reserve in nearby 'Sausage Valley'.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

C04196

Sausage Valley

(AWM C04196)

200 of them were sent to Pozières to construct a new jumping-off trench in anticipation of a further attack. On 2 August, the men began moving back into the front line. By this time, their numbers were down from more than 900 before the battle to 677. On the fourth, after two delays, another major attack on the ridge was ordered and began with a preliminary artillery barrage at 9.15 in the evening. Being

mid-summer, there was still enough light for the men to see their objectives. Finally, 2 Division was successful, and the ridge was theirs. General Gough, commander of the British Fifth Army, congratulated the men, saying that they had 'inflicted a severe defeat on the enemy and secured us most valuable ground.'

It all came at a terrible cost, however. 2 Division suffered 6 846 casualties, and the Australian War Memorial informs us that 23 Battalion lost almost ninety per cent of its original members. Cyril, a reinforcement, died along with them. There are no details of his death, and his body was never found. He was among the many who were dismembered or pulverised, or buried as a result of the explosions of mortar bombs and heavy shells.



The Pozières battlefield in 1917. Note the wooden cross above a grave.
(AWM E01003D)

Because he had no known grave, Cyril's name was inscribed on the Villers Bretonneux Memorial after the war.



2 Division Memorial, Pozières (AWM E02059)

Sources

Australian War Memorial

Google Earth

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