

Corporal Horace Lang MM

Rod Martin

Twenty-two year-old Horace Lang, a clerk by trade, obviously had a higher school education, as he indicated on his attestation form that he had spent a year in college cadets when he was eighteen. Horace signed up on 29 March 1915, and in late April was allocated to D Company of the new and hurriedly created 24 Infantry Battalion. The training camp at Broadmeadows was overflowing and the army echelon wanted to move some men out and overseas quickly, so it formed a new battalion and prepared to dispatch it to Egypt very quickly. Extra training, it argued, could be done there.



C and D Companies, 24 Battalion 1915

(AWM DAX 0523)

Horace was a slightly built young man with black hair and grey eyes, approximately 169 centimetres in height and weighing around sixty-five kilos. At the time of enlistment, he was living with his parents at 56 North Street in Ascot Vale. Horace was one of many young men who besieged the recruiting offices in late 1914 and early 1915, eager to go to war for reasons of patriotism, or a chance to see some of the world, or adventurism, or possibly all three. It was the time before the landing at Gallipoli, and these fit and keen young men, who became known as 'Dinkum Aussies', had no idea of the horrors of war that awaited them.

Along with his new mates, Horace sailed for Egypt on A14 HMAT *Euripides* on 8 May. By that time, the Allies had landed in the Dardanelles and the heavily censored reports being fed back suggested that good progress was being made against the Turkish defenders. Only three months later, recruitment figures would drop off sharply as the

ever-expanding lists of deaths published in the papers indicated clearly that things were not going according to plan.



Troops boarding HMAT *Euripides* 8 May 1915
(AWM PB 0377)

After the extra training in Egypt, 24 Battalion landed at Gallipoli in early September.



24 Battalion men marching up White's Valley, September 1915
(AWM C 02105)

At that stage of the campaign, the situation had reached something of a stalemate. The big battles, such as Lone Pine and The Nek, had been fought the previous month and, apart from Lone Pine, had largely been failures. Even at Lone Pine, the soldiers had a fight on their hands to hold the position they had gained. The Turks did not like the idea of losing territory! 24 Battalion was sent to reinforce the troops holding the position at Lone Pine. It spent the next sixteen weeks there, rotating in and out of the firing line every day because the fighting was so dangerous and exhausting. When out of the line, the men rested in White's Valley nearby.

The allied troops were evacuated from Gallipoli in December and, by the end of the year, 24 Battalion was back in Egypt. There it was reinforced and quickly prepared for a move to the Western Front in France. While other men were involved in a reorganisation and expansion of the AIF, 1 Anzac Corps, including 24 Battalion, sailed for France on 20 March 1916 and were sent to the so-called 'nursery sector' near Armentières. The area got its name because it was a relatively quiet section of the Western Front, and being located there allowed the troops to acclimatize themselves to the realities of a modern industrial war without being thrown into a heated battle. At this time, according to British historian William Philpott, the men had little battle knowledge and little *esprit de corps*. Both would develop slowly over the coming months as a result of massive bloodlettings at places such as Fromelles, Pozières and Mouquet Farm.

By 1 June, members of 1 Anzac Corps were conducting trench raids in the nursery sector and getting used to the routine of bombardment, counter-bombardment, aerial attack and sniper bullets. On 1 July, the Battle of the Somme began with large-scale attacks by British and French troops across a wide section of the Somme Valley. The battle had no real strategic objective. It was primarily designed to provide support for the French forces, at that time under heavy assault at the fortress of Verdun in the southern part of the Western Front, and to wear down the German forces at the same time. It was a deliberate battle of attrition. British commander-in-chief Sir Douglas Haig referred to it as the 'Wearing-out Battle'.

Australian forces were not directly involved in the initial attack. Their baptism of fire began when 5 Division (a part of II Anzac Corps) was involved in the disastrous diversionary attack at Fromelles on 19 July. 5533 men were killed or wounded in one night. They were given the almost impossible task of attempting to capture a reinforced German salient after attacking across 400 metres of open ground. It was a bloody baptism indeed.

I Anzac Corps' turn came later in the month. It was asked to attempt the capture of the village of Pozières and the ridge on which it was situated. It was hoped that that ridge could then be used as a stepping-off point for the capture of the fortified German position at Thiepval. On 23 July, 1 Division troops attacked and gained a foothold in the ruins of the village.



Pozières village 1916

(AWM EZ 0144)

As part of 2 Division, 24 Battalion did not arrive at Pozières until 26 July, but when it did it walked into a maelstrom of shellfire and one of its men was killed almost immediately. The Germans did not appreciate the loss of their position, and were constantly attacking in attempts to win it back. During late July and into August, the battalion spent time in the front trenches, holding off the German attacks. In late August, the men were ordered to concentrate on the German stronghold of Mouquet Farm. The attack on this position had begun on 5 August and, by late in the month, the third assault was being attempted. 24 Battalion participated in that final attack, learning that the farm was an extensive redoubt after seeing Prussian guards 'disappear' into the bowels of the ridge below it, and seeing German soldiers with canisters on their backs that were determined to be flame throwers after a bullet hit one and blew it and the man carrying it to pieces.



Mouquet Farm battlefield 1916

(AWM H 15927)

All efforts to take the farm failed, however, and 1 Anzac Corps was withdrawn from the battle on 5 September, exhausted and depleted. It had suffered 6 300 casualties for no real gain. The position was finally taken by other forces on 26 September.

The Battle of Pozières led to the greatest single loss of Australian troops in any battle at any time. There were 23 000 casualties, 6 800 of whom died. As official historian Charles Bean wrote, Pozières Ridge 'is more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth.'

1 Anzac Corps was so badly affected by the Pozières experience that it had to be kept out of the firing line for two months. During that time, Horace received promotion to the rank of lance-corporal. Later in November, with the unit now back in the area of the front line, he was awarded a Military Medal. His citation read:

For conspicuous gallantry in constructing and holding an advanced bombing post near FLERS on 18/19 November within close range of the enemy. The garrison had to remain motionless throughout the day but Corpl. Lang refused to be relieved until his company left the trenches, setting a most encouraging example of endurance.

On 4 January 1917, while the battalion was still alternating between the front line and labouring tasks in the area of the Somme, Horace was appointed to the rank of temporary corporal. This was not as good as it sounded: such appointments usually involved the responsibilities of a corporal, but without the pay rise! He received his due recognition (and extra money) on 4 April when he was awarded the rank of corporal. The war was not going all his way, however. Ten days later he was taken to hospital with a bout of asthma and did not rejoin his unit until 23 April.

At the beginning of May, 24 Battalion was in the area of Bullecourt, near Arras. The Germans had withdrawn to the heavily fortified Hindenburg Line at the start of the year, and a spring offensive against some of the German positions had been planned to coincide with a French attack further south. In April, an attack on the village of Bullecourt had occurred, ending in disaster and high casualties. Despite this, British command wanted to try again, and a new attack was planned for 3 May. 24 Battalion would be part of this.

At 3.45 am, after a preliminary bombardment, Australian and British troops went over the top. The Australians penetrated the German line but then met determined opposition that frustrated the plan to envelop the village. Without the backup necessary to go on, the troops began retreating to their own line at around midday. According to Private Jim McAlpine, Horace was alive and uninjured at that time. In the process of retreating, however, he was wounded in the arm and shoulder. Regimental Sergeant-Major Williams saw him, sitting down and holding a Lewis Gun (a light machine gun), and told him to get to a dressing station and have his wounds attended to. Lieutenant Whitear saw him in no man's land, attempting to get to the dressing station. Whitear judged that Horace was mortally wounded by shell and bullets and believed that he died before reaching the station. Corporal Mathews then confirmed that Horace did die in that way.



Australian troops preparing to attack at Bullecourt, May 1917
(AWM E 00454)

Like many others on the battlefield, Horace's body disappeared. He was initially reported as wounded in action, then wounded and missing. Even as late as 28 May his parents were informed that he was wounded. A court of enquiry judged in December that year that he had been killed in action. However, the Australian authorities had already assumed that he was dead because they granted a pension of one pound a fortnight to his mother in late August. They *may* have done this because of an incorrect report that appeared in the *Argus* newspaper in July or August, suggesting that he was a prisoner of war. The sight of such a report must have been very disconcerting for his parents.

As Horace's body was never found, his name was recorded on the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial.



Australian missing in Action Memorial, Bullecourt
(Courtesy of Ian Steer, Panoramio)

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