

Sergeant Alfred Thomas Young

Rod Martin

Twenty-one years old, a clerk by profession, Alfred Young was one of the first Australians to enlist, signing up on 15 August 1914. He lived at 22 Wilson Street, Moonee Ponds and had spent two of his school years in the senior cadets, so he had some basic military training. He was allocated to the locally-based battalion, the seventh, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel 'Pompey' Elliott. Alfred was a sizeable man for his time, standing 178 centimetres tall and weighing seventy-two kilos. His potential was quickly recognised by the military, and he was promoted to the rank of corporal only two days after enlisting. He completed his training at Broadmeadows, destined to be in the first cohort of Australian troops to go overseas.



Recruits at the Broadmeadows training camp 1914

(AWM P00858.007)



Troops marching over Princes Bridge prior to leaving for overseas, October 1914
(AWM J00355)

The first convoy left Melbourne on 19 October 1914, headed initially for Albany in Western Australia, whence all the troop ships from Australia and New Zealand would sail in tandem across the Indian Ocean. Alfred was on board A20 HMAT *Hororata*.



HMAT *Hororata* leaving Port Melbourne in 1915

(AWM PB0435)

The men in the convoy thought that they were heading for the Western Front in Europe. However, once they reached the Red Sea, orders came through diverting them to Egypt. The British government had decided upon an attack at the Dardanelles, aimed at capturing Constantinople and putting German ally Turkey out of the war. The Anzac forces were to be in the forefront of this attack.

After training in Egypt (and causing mayhem in nearby Cairo), the troops finally headed for Gallipoli, via the Greek island of Lemnos, on 8 April 1915. Details of the landing on 25 April are well-known. 7 Battalion was part of the second wave to move towards the beach, early in the morning.



Boats, believed to be those of 8 Battalion, approaching the shore at Anzac Cove,
25 April 1915

(AWM H03546)

Because of the vagaries of the currents, the boats from the various battalions became intermixed and all floated north, away from the designated landing site. The result was that, when the men landed, the units were scattered. The priority was to make for the hills as quickly as possible. The mix up could be sorted out later. As it was, many 7 Battalion men did not even make it to the beach. Of the 140 men carried in the first four boats, only thirty-five landed unscathed. The Turks maintained a withering rate of fire on the first boats as they sat on the sand, killing many more of the troops. As far as we know, Alfred was one of the lucky ones who landed uninjured, and may have been one of the first to take cover behind sand heaps on the edge of the beach. Pompey was ordered to try to gather his men together, and spent much of the day doing so. Then, at about 9.30 pm, he was wounded in the ankle and had to be evacuated. Alfred was one of the lucky ones. 7 Battalion's war diary reported that, on 25 April alone, approximately 400 were killed, wounded or missing. It was just the start of an eight-month long struggle against the Turks and the terrain.

On the night of the twenty-fifth, the battalion was ordered to move up to a hill that became known as McCay's. There they began to dig trenches while other, until then missing, men were gathered together and moved up. Seventy were discovered on 26 April, and some were still being discovered as late as the last day of the month. It was probably because of the gaps in the ranks that Alfred was promoted to the rank of sergeant on 30 April.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

C03156

McCay's Hill

(AWM C03156)

The Turks resisted the men's efforts to advance, of course, using shrapnel shells and machine guns, and the battalion stayed in much the same spot until 4 May, when it went into bivouac. The next day, the acting commander received orders to move south to Cape Helles. British forces had landed there on the twenty-fifth, but had suffered a considerable number of casualties, and help was required from the Anzacs in attempts to take the village of Krithia. By the time the Australians arrived by boat, an attack against the village had already been conducted using British and French troops, with disastrous results. Despite this, the incompetent British commander,

Major-General Hunter-Weston, decided to mount a second attack, over the same open, killing ground. This time the Australians were involved.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

G02065

Krithia, viewed from the Australian front trench

(AWM G02065)

Another, predictable disaster occurred. At 5.00 pm on 8 May, the Australians were ordered to attack, 7 Battalion forming part of the front line. Suffering considerable casualties, the men advanced about 250 metres and were then ordered to dig in.

For those 250 metres, the battalion suffered approximately 250 casualties: one man for every metre. The figure included nineteen officers, three of them killed (including a lieutenant-colonel). Alfred was one of the non-commissioned officers wounded. He was struck in the upper arm and taken to a field hospital. On 18 May he was evacuated to Malta and thence to England, staying there until 28 May 1916.

Alfred returned to combat on 29 May. By that time, Gallipoli had been evacuated, and the Anzac troops were in the process of being transferred to the Western Front in France. As part of 1 Anzac Corps, 7 Battalion had sailed from Alexandria to Marseilles in early March, headed for the so-called 'nursery sector' near Armentières in northern France. The area had that name because it was a relatively quiet section of the front, where new troops could acclimatise themselves to the realities of modern industrial war without being in too much danger. By the end of May, 7 Battalion was based along the front line at Fleurbaix, directly opposite the German-held village of Fromelles. When he rejoined the battalion, Alfred would have noticed many changes. Some of his old compatriots would have been killed or badly wounded at Gallipoli, and vanished from the ranks. Moreover, as part of the enlargement and reconstruction of the Australian forces after Gallipoli, approximately one-half of the 7 Battalion men had been transferred to a newly-formed battalion, and their places filled by new arrivals from Australia. The idea was to mix the new, untried recruits in with a cohort of now experienced soldiers.

However, everyone was new to the conditions of the Western Front. Even though the battalion was away from the front line when Alfred arrived at the start of June, a man was killed in action on 3 June while working on communication and support trenches. Seven days later, the battalion was relieved and moved back to the village of Sailly. According to its war diary, the battalion had a '*good march*' in the dark and the men were '*comfortably billeted*' by 2.00 am.

The troops stayed at Sailly until 18 June, and were then ordered to move to Neuve Eglise (now Nieukerke) just over the border in southern Belgium. On the twenty-third, they took over four sectors of the front line near Ploegsteert, in the area of Messines. This region, centred upon the town of Ypres, had been a 'hot spot' since soon after the war broke out in 1914. By 1916, two unsuccessful attacks had been mounted in the region by the Allies. When 7 Battalion arrived, regular sniping, aerial attacks, small-scale assaults and bombardments were the order of the day. On 29 June, bombardments were made by both sides, the Australian artillery continuing until eleven o'clock at night. The enemy was reported as responding '*vigourously*' [sic] with seventy-seven millimetre high explosive shells and trench mortars. It was during this bombardment that another one of Pompey's 7 Battalion originals, Sergeant Leo Harty MM, was killed. He was just twenty-one years old.

The men stayed at Ploegsteert until 4 July, when they were relieved and moved back to Neuve Eglise. On the tenth, as part of 1 Australian Division, they were ordered to move south, in the direction of the Somme Valley in France. At the start of the month, what was possibly the greatest battle of the war began on the Somme when thousands of British and French troops attacked the German fortifications. The attack quickly became a disaster, fifty-seven thousand British casualties occurring on the first day alone. By the tenth, British commander Sir Douglas Haig was looking for reinforcements. The Anzacs in the nursery sector were an obvious choice. 1 Division moved south-east over several days, finally basing itself near the town of Albert on 20 July. The next day, the commanding officer of 7 Battalion received instructions regarding an attack on a village called Pozières.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

A05776

The main street of Pozières in December 1916

(AWM A05776)

The attack would presage one of the saddest events in Australian military history, more than equal to the disastrous attack by 5 Division at Fromelles only two nights previously – which cost 5 533 casualties. Haig wanted control of Pozières and the ridge behind it as that would provide access to the German stronghold of Thiepval. By the time 1 Division arrived, the British had already attacked the village three times, but had failed to seize it. It was now the Anzacs' turn. At midnight on 23 July, 1 and 3 Infantry Brigades attacked the German forces in the village. By 3.45 am, 7 Battalion's commander was informed that the target had been captured. His brigade, the second, had moved into trenches near Contalmaison, south of Pozières, in support. The troops who captured the village were then ordered to dig in and consolidate. However, the Germans were not finished. They desperately wanted to recapture the ground and their shelling, machine gun and sniper fire were incessant. During that night, 7 Battalion men were involved in carrying rations, ammunition and bombs up to the men of 3 Brigade. The Germans were bombarding them with large calibre high explosive shells while they were doing it. On the morning of 24 July, the 7 Battalion commander noted in the war diary that his unit had suffered forty-seven casualties.

By the next day, the men of the seventh were progressively relieving those of 1 and 3 Brigades in the front line trenches at Pozières village. The description in the war diary gives a good indication of the conditions they found themselves under:

No houses other than the smallest portions of same were left in POZIERES as whole area was a mass of broken clods trees and masonry. The making of trenches practically impossible as the earth would not stand, consequently men were occupying crater holes and were continually being buried by shells and having to be dug out. The enemy continuously deluged POZIERES during the period the Battalion was in occupation, with H.E. Shells of large calibre, sometimes averaging 15 to 20 a minute, during which the men maintained a cheerful and resolute spirit which was worthy of the highest admiration, as they had no enemy to retaliate on, could not see or hear the effect of our own guns, but had simply to suffer.

1 Division was relieved on the night of 26 July and withdrew to Sausage Valley, a supply area nearby. The 7 Battalion men were reported as being 'heartily glad' to be in a comparatively safe place so they could have a sleep, feeling exhausted as they were. They numbered 660: prior to being involved in the battle there had been one thousand in the ranks. 1 Division had suffered a total of 5 285 casualties in three days of fighting.

The relief of 1 Division started what was to become like a game of musical chairs. 2 Division took over and began an attack on the windmill, which was the highest point on Pozières ridge, on 29 July. However, they were not successful and their effort was criticised by Haig. Further efforts brought success on 4 August, but at the cost of 6 846 casualties. 4 Division took over on the sixth and was ordered to advance towards the strongholds of Mouquet Farm and Thiepval. After nine days of unsuccessful combat and the loss of 4 649 casualties, that division in turn was replaced by 1 Division. Alfred and his companions were once again in the thick of it.

Between 15 and 17 August, 7 Battalion was involved in a number of work parties, repairing damaged trenches, digging new ones and setting up machine gun posts. All the time, the troops were bombarded, strafed and machine-gunned by the Germans, still desperate to recapture the ruins of the village and, especially, the high point at the windmill. The casualties sustained by the battalion in one trench-digging operation alone on the seventeenth were ten killed and eleven wounded.

On the morning of 18 August, 7 Battalion took over a section of the front line. Later in the day, an order came through, requiring them to prepare for an attack. The men moved slowly forward, into the area dominated by the windmill (which, by this time, was no more than a '*mound of battered brick about 15 feet high.*'). It was a clearly defined target for the enemy, and they shelled it heavily and accurately.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

The ruins of the windmill at Pozieres, October 1916

(AWM E00015)

The number of casualties incurred was reduced because the battalion commander spread his men out relatively thinly across the ruined landscape. The majority of those who were injured were deemed to be suffering from shell shock.

During the day of 20 August, a number of men were involved in work on communication trenches, instructed by some engineers. This was still a dangerous task, however, as the German bombardment was almost continuous. As a result, twenty-six men became casualties. One of them was Alfred. He was probably killed by a shell: there are no extant Red Cross reports concerning his death. It may well have been the case that the massive numbers of casualties incurred at Pozieres (by the time it was relieved for the second time, on 22 August, 1 Division had suffered a further 2 650 casualties) overwhelmed those making reports about the deaths.

Alfred was buried in the Pozieres British Cemetery. He was twenty-three years old at the time of his death.



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

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