

## BIRD. S.

# 3011 Cpl Stratford George Bird.  
9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade.  
B Company of 34<sup>th</sup> Battalion.  
Third Division AIF.

Stratford 'Birdie' Bird was at Amiens early on the morning of Tuesday 8 August 1918 as the 34<sup>th</sup> pursued the Germans, who had been caught off guard by the allied attack, which had commenced without the usual preliminary artillery bombardment. The rapidly retreating Germans posed little threat to 'Birdie', until suddenly he and John Haddow of Charlestown were confronted by a German machine gun crew, who had remained in their dugout. 'Birdie' engaged the Germans in hand to hand fighting and despite multiple bayonet wounds, continued to fight until he was killed by a bullet to the forehead.

Born 1897, at Spring Gully, Scone, Stratford George Bird was the eldest child of Richard John Albert Bird, a dairy farmer and his wife Mary (Duckworth) of Spring Gully. He and his brother Albert and sister Mary were educated at the small one teacher Owen's Gap School by Mr Thomas Jones.

Stratford was seven years old when his mother died following the birth of her fourth child Catherine, who also died. The children were then raised by Mary's sister Kate while their father Albert continued to work his dairy.

In 1907 when Mary's brother William married, he and his new wife took over the raising of the children.

Stratford was 19 years and four months of age and working on his father's dairy farm, when all single men between the ages of 21 and 35 were called upon to register and serve as members of the Citizen forces (Militia). No exemptions were granted, those required to register included lawyers, doctors, clergymen, judges and even politicians.

All men within the age group who resided at or near Parkville, Wingen, Sparkes Creek, Kars Springs, Bunnan and Owens Gap were required to attend a meeting at the old Scone hospital on Saturday 14 October 1916.

Due to his age, Stratford was not compelled by the Commonwealth Defence Act to attend this meeting however he did and went beyond registering for the Militia by volunteering for overseas service with the AIF on 17 October 1916.

*Anticipating a "Yes" vote in the 28 October conscription referendum, Attorney General (later Prime Minister) Billy Hughes had proceeded with legislation and introduced Part IV of the Defence Act. When the referendum was lost, the men who were already in camps in Sydney and Goulburn were given the choice of transferring into the AIF or being discharged.*

Promising his father that he would finish the shed he had been building when he returned from the war, he gained his father's consent to enlist and was accepted into the army three days later.

Stratford was admitted to Rutherford field hospital two weeks after entering camp suffering from a severe chest cold. Granted leave from Maitland camp he returned home believing it was his final leave. On his second day back in camp after fainting three times, he was sent to the field hospital at West Maitland suffering from an undiagnosed illness, which doctors later told him almost cost him his life. Within days of being released he was back in the field hospital suffering measles. Upon release he returned to his unit believing he was about to embark for England and would spend Christmas 1916 at sea. When the planned embarkation was delayed he unsuccessfully applied for home leave.

During January 1917 Stratford was put through a program of very strenuous training, spending long days on the rifle range and the parade ground and taking part in some long route marches. On the 24 January, led by 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants John Samuel Bradbury and Leslie Gordon Clark, he embarked on the 10,046 ton His Majesty's Australian Transport A68 *Anchisses* in Sydney, for the voyage to England with the 7<sup>th</sup> reinforcements for the 34<sup>th</sup> Battalion known as "Maitland's own Battalion".

The battalion had been formed from the men, who had joined the "Wallabies", a group of 43 men who had marched from Narrabri on 8 December and marched through many towns including Scone on their way to Sydney to enlist. During this epic march their numbers increased at every town they passed through. Sixty men had raised their hand and volunteered at a meeting attended by the Wallabies at Scone on the 23 December with eight joining the march which was terminated at Newcastle where the marchers enlisted.

The 34<sup>th</sup> with the 33<sup>rd</sup>, 35<sup>th</sup> and 36th Infantry Battalions and the 9<sup>th</sup> Light Mortar Battery then formed the 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division of the AIF.

Stratford, a well built man who weighed 12 Stone, (76kg) when he enlisted, had a dark complexion, grey eyes and dark hair. He was the only Scone man onboard the A68 and disembarked at Devonport on 27 March before marching 5 mile (8kl) carrying full packs to a isolation camp to be quarantined due to a meningitis scare. Two days after rejoining his unit, which was training at Durrington in Wiltshire, he and the other 29 in his hut were quarantined for 24 days after they had allowed some visiting men to sleep in their hut because of the inclement weather. These men, who were to join them as they were reviewed by King George V the following day, were found to be suffering from mumps and measles. Stratford and his hut mates not only missed being reviewed by the King, they missed out on the 4 days leave given to the rest of the men. While at Durrington on 6 May he learnt that America had declared war on Germany promising to send 1 million men to France.

He rejoined his unit on 29 May and soon realised how easy training had been in Australia, where discipline had been a farce.

Two American divisions disembarked in Saint Nazaire Harbour in France in June 1917 but did not go to the front. Trouble occurred on the Eastern front on 8 July as Russian soldiers, learning of the Lenin led revolution in Russia, began to pull out of the line. Stratford, who now weighed 15½ stone (99kg), three stone (19kg) more than he weighed six months earlier when he left Australia, moved to France 31 July with the 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion. He was assigned to B Company and entrenched on the high ground north of the Somme River.

Stratford continued to have difficulty complying with the orders given by Officers he considered incompetent. He wrote home explaining that he had at all times acted honourably and showed self control. Stratford advised his brother Albert against joining the army believing that someone was needed at home to assist his father.

Four ANZAC Divisions fought together for the first time on 29 September 1917 as two million Russian troops deserted.

Stratford was wounded at Broodseinde Ridge on 1 October and treated for shrapnel wounds to his neck and right arm at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Ambulance Station before being transferred to the 54<sup>th</sup> French General Hospital. In a letter home he said his comrades had fought through heavy rain from 4 October to the 18 October with only one out of his platoon of fifty coming through the battle unharmed. Within days of being discharged from hospital, he was again wounded during the second battle of Passchendaele (26 October/6 November). This time suffering severe multiple gunshot wounds he was transferred to England on 18 November by the Hospital Ship "*St Denis*" and admitted to the County Middlesex War Hospital.

On 20 November a small contingent of American engineers became the first American servicemen to fight in the war when the advancing Germans over ran them and the British troops they were assisting as engineers. Taking up the rifles of the fallen troops these engineers fought for ten days suffering 18 casualties.

Meanwhile Stratford following a month in hospital, during which time he wrote letters home each night, was released to a rest camp to convalesce. He believed he would be back in France for Christmas but thought his fighting days may be over.

Stratford returned to France on 3 January 1918, when after three years of trench warfare on the Western Front, both the Allied and German armies were near exhaustion. On the Eastern Front the Russians had withdrawn from the war. On the 14 January Stratford wrote he was pleased to be in a reserve position and not in the front line as the snow was a foot thick on the ground. The next ten weeks was the quietest period of the war and Stratford made the most of the rest period.

With the collapse of the Russian forces, the Germans were free to move all of their troops on to

the Western Front. General Erich von Ludendorff devised a plan to drive the allied forces out of Europe before the Americans, who were still training in France, entered the fighting.

"Operation Michael" was launched by Ludendorff in the early hours of 21 March 1918, near the Somme river. Following a five hour artillery bombardment by 6,000 German guns, 63 German Divisions consisting of 1 million men attacked the 26 Allied Divisions on a 60 mile front.

The British trenches had been quite for months and were at that time occupied by young inexperienced troops who were overwhelmed by the strength of the surprise attack. They were forced back across the Somme returning to the Germans all the territory they [Germans] had lost during the previous two years.

The commander of the Australian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, Major-General John Monash and the members of the 33<sup>rd</sup> and 34<sup>th</sup> Battalions together with the men of the 3<sup>rd</sup> British Cavalry Division, who were regarded by the Australians as True soldiers, were all in agreement that, due to bad training and untried officers, the young British troops were not worth the cost of putting them in uniform. The British Commander claimed his men needed a wire behind them to keep them in place.

On 25 March 1918 the Australian 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Divisions were rushed to the Somme by train in a effort to halt the German offensive. At this time American Engineers were once again forced to take up arms and fight as infantry using the unfamiliar rifles of the British troops they were with at Amiens. The 34<sup>th</sup> Battalion arrived at it's destination at 4.00am on 31 March and were in the front line by 2 o'clock that afternoon to support the 33<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. The 33<sup>rd</sup> advanced to the Western side of the Villers-Bretonneux to Demuin Road, from where, with no artillery support due to the uncertainty of the location of the British troops, they began a bayonet charge against the defending Germans at Lancer Wood. The 33<sup>rd</sup> quickly suffered 168 casualties before the 34<sup>th</sup> swept through their depleted ranks and without firing a shot captured a section of the German line. The 34<sup>th</sup>, incensed at seeing the dead and wounded of the 33<sup>rd</sup> as they moved forward, spared nobody who opposed them. This action has been described as the 34<sup>th</sup> "Finest Hour".

On 4 April, fifteen German divisions attacked the French and British lines on a twenty mile front in a bid to capture Amiens. When the British 14<sup>th</sup> Division lost the town of Hamel and their 18<sup>th</sup> Division withdrew, the fate of the Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry brigade appeared grim until the 36<sup>th</sup> Battalion forced the Germans to withdraw.

While awaiting their orders, the 34<sup>th</sup> came under heavy enemy shell fire losing 4 officers and 25 other ranks. Colonel Leslie Morshead moved the 34<sup>th</sup> to the north and north east of Villers-Bretonneux where at 6.20 pm, Lieutenant-Colonel Goddard ordered them to attack and capture the high ground and the railway bridge without a pre-attack artillery barrage. Despite German machine gun posts

defending the high ground, the 34<sup>th</sup> were successful in gaining their objective and in so doing capturing nine of the enemy's machine guns and their crews. At 1am on the 5 April the 34<sup>th</sup> captured the bridge and wiping out their opposition capturing a further 6 machine guns.

Captain C E W Bean, the Australian war correspondent and General Sir Henry Rawlinson both credited the Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade and the 3<sup>rd</sup> British Cavalry as the saviours of Villers-Bretonneux. On 8 April Stratford wrote that he had just come out of the line for a few hours rest.

The Australians then held Villers-Bretonneux till 23 April, when they were relieved by British troops. Stratford Bird was then appointed Lance Corporal.

The Australians were forced to re-enter the line on Anzac day 1918 after the British troops had been driven from Villers-Bretonneux by the Germans. Regaining control of the town they received praise from many including those who had previously considered them undisciplined civilians in uniform. Brigadier-General Grogan referred to the Australian victory at Villers-Bretonneux "As perhaps the greatest individual feat of the war". Another British officer, Major Neville Lytton, believed the Australians had made one of the most outstanding manoeuvres of the war, and irrespective of their apparent lack of discipline had shown their battlefield discipline was absolutely perfect. He continued stating "if Villers-Bretonneux had been the Australian's only battle of the war, it had won them the right to be known as one of the greatest fighting nations in the world".

Australian General Monash summed up the position, when he said the 9<sup>th</sup> brigade of the AIF had held Villers-Bretonneux for three weeks before they withdrew for a rest on the 23 April. The English had let the Germans back in on the same day.

Stratford wrote home saying that the heavy rain had made their job harder as when they regained the trenches they could not rest or sleep because of the knee deep water in the trenches. He had received a bayonet wound to the left leg which had remained untreated for four days until he withdrew from the trenches with trench feet. Describing the charge of the 31<sup>st</sup> March, he said his company had done a splendid job while suffering only a small number of casualties. He continued that he did not hold a very high opinion of the New South Wales railway men whose strike in 1917 had caused the biggest industrial upheaval ever experienced in Australia or the anti conscription campaigners in Australia.

The Americans put two infantry divisions into the front line 28 May 1918 and within weeks an influenza plaque swept through the battlefield, effecting men from both sides. The plaque was blamed on the Americans who had brought 20,000 already infected troops to France. Stratford wrote and told his sister of the death her friend Ivy Bowd's brother Arthur at Villers-Bretonneux saying that Arthur, who was well liked, had shown great courage at all time. At the time of writing Stratford was

billeted in a French mansion and was looking forward to his 21<sup>st</sup> Birthday.

He was admitted to a field hospital on 7 June suffering from the flu. Ludendorff's offensive had lasted only three months. By 18 June the German troops, fatigued and weakened by the influenza, lost their momentum. Four weary Australian Divisions were holding more than half of the Allied front line. For their gallant actions during the failed German offensive 57 Allied soldiers were awarded the Empire's highest award the Victoria Cross.

It was the 27 July before Stratford was well enough to return to his unit and on the following day he was sent to the Australian Corps Gas School for a week's instruction. Returning, he discovered that during his absence the Australian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division had been joined on 4<sup>th</sup> July by four companies of the American 33<sup>rd</sup> Illinois Division. The Americans were assigned to the Australians for ten weeks to be trained and indoctrinated while observing the Australians in the field.

Stratford was made temporary Corporal on 4 August and on the morning of 8 August Stratford was in charge of a small section of men who were working their way forward through the mist. Stratford and three others were confronted by fifteen Germans manning two machine guns. Either heroically or foolishly these Germans had refused to withdraw. Army records show that Stratford George Bird single handedly attacked the Germans who had opened fire on him and his men. Entering their trench Stratford, was twice wounded by enemy bayonets but continued to fight until the German officer shot him in the forehead with his revolver. Sgt Thomas Scott, giving evidence at a court of inquiry into Stratford's death, confirmed earlier evidence that a recommendation for a posthumous Military Medal for Stratford had been lodged.

Following the retreat of his troops on 8 August, a day he described as Germany's 'blackest day', General Ludendorff telegraphed Crown Prince Rupprecht, a son of Kaiser Wilhelm 11, offering to resign.

At Amiens, between the 7 and 14 August, the Australians, although victorious, suffered 6,491 casualties. The 34<sup>th</sup> Battalion lost 4 Officers and 82 other ranks.

After observing the Australians for two weeks, the Commander of the American division, General Pershing withdrew his troops from the line claiming they were not adequately prepared for front line duty.

Stratford 'Birdie' Bird was buried by Corporal Isaac James Willoughby MM and Sgt Robert Lindsay of A Coy of the 34<sup>th</sup> who marked the grave with Stratford's rifle, to which they attached his identity disc. In 1925 Stratford's remains were exhumed and reburied in the Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery, Fouilloy. Grave No III. F. 4. A headstone placed on his grave read.

3011 Corporal  
S.G. Bird M.M.  
34<sup>th</sup> BN AUSTRALIA INF  
8<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST 1918

Stratford's father received his son's service medals The British War #55962 and Victory Medals #55042, but not the Military Medal.

On 9 September 1930 the inclusion of MM on Stratford's headstone was queried by a representative of the Imperial War Graves Commission, who despite the Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery Register referring to S.G. Bird M.M. failed to confirm that the award of the Military Medal, given for bravery in the field, had actually been gazetted. This unnamed person then recommended that the headstone on Stratford Bird's grave be replaced. A new headstone was erected bearing no reference to the Military Medal but with Stratford's name off centre, leaving room for the possible inclusion of MM at a later date. The Commonwealth War Graves register still in 2005 records this grave as that of Corporal Stratford George Bird MM.

Stratford's name also appears on;

Memorial Panel 127

The Australian War Memorial at Canberra.

The Memorial in front of the Scone War Memorial Swimming Pool.

The Roll of Honour at the Scott Memorial Hospital, Scone.

The First World War Memorial Arch in St Luke's Anglican Church, Scone.

The Honour Roll at the Scone RSL Club.



The photograph of Stratford's grave was taken for this book by French Military Historian and World War 1 Battlefield tour guide, Yves Fohlen.



Photographs of # 3011 Cpl Stratford George Bird.  
Courtesy Dalma Pritchard.