

JAMES DAVID CAIRNS
1894-1916

James David Cairns was born in Balmain 1894, He was a Ships Fireman, when he enlisted in the AIF on the 28th July 1915 aged 21 years 2 months. His Reg No 3273A. Rank private. and Battalion 2nd.

He embarked from Sydney on November 2nd 1915, and transferred to the 53rd Battalion on the 16th February 1916 the 53rd were known as The Whale Oil Guards as they polished their helmets with Whale Oil.

At the twenty seven hour Battle at Fromelles a village 16 kilometres west of Lille, which started at 6pm on the 19th July 1916, 1,299 young Australian lost their lives, one of these men was James David Cairns.

An informal truce was made with the Germans to bring in the wounded who littered No Mans Land between the opposing trenches, The truce was made possible through the humanity of a Bavarian officer who had come across a Australian batman searching for his dead officer near enemy lines.

Robert and Annie Cairns were notified that James was listed as missing on the 28th September 1916, His allotment of 4 Shillings (40 cents) per day that he had deducted from his pay and payed to his mother was stopped on the 29th of October 1916 and his parents were not notified of his death until the 15th September 1917. At which time his mother was asked to pay back the 40c per day she had been paid from the time of his death, till the time her allowance was stopped. (102 Days).

For the Australians Fromelles was a bitter introduction to the chaotic savagery of warfare on the Western front.

Given the task of taking three rows of the Germans trenches they entered the firing line late on the night of Sunday 16th July where they were fired

on continuously by German machine guns and artillery. The Germans continued the shelling all day on the Monday and despite the heavy casualties inflicted on the Australians by German shelling. while they waited for the order "To go over the Top", and many more being killed or wounded on the way across the 200 metre No Mans Land the German front trenches were quickly cleared by the first wave of the Australians, While the second, third and fourth wave pressed through the German defences and out into the open country beyond.

But as the scattered parties of Infantry pressed on further they were bewildered at being unable to find the third row of trenches that they were supposed to seize and hold as their own new front line, The only material success of this Battle was the capture of over a 1,000 metres of the Germans trenches by the Australians.

Two years later when details of the German defences came into British possession it was found that the Third Trench which was to have been the Australians objective was in fact non existent.

The Australian Chief of Staff, Brudenell-White had forecast this tragedy at Fromelles two days before it took place, and had been appalled by the lack of preparation and planning on the part of the British Corps to which the Australians were attached.

If Field-Marshal Earl Haig's original intention of using nothing but an artillery demonstration had been enforced the shattering losses to the Australians would never have occurred,

Haig took a careful interest in the Australians introduction to the Western Front, On the 22nd July he wrote "**I visited General Sir Hubert Gough a commander of the 4th British Army after lunch to make sure that the Australians had only been given a simple task,**"

Then on the 27th July "**The Australians are in great spirits one regiment that began the fight with**

900 men had finished with 1300 this was due to men from other units who had been ordered to withdraw and rest joining them,"

Despite the fact that if Gough had his own way the Australians would have been committed to Battle with even less preparation after the Battle Haig wrote **"I think the cause of the failure was due to lack of preparation, The day I visited Anzac Corps H.Q. where I met Birdwood and Brudenell-White I found some of their divisional Generals so ignorant, and like many colonials so conceited that they cannot be trusted to work out unaided the plans of attack"**.

The Fact is at the time of POZIERES there was only one Australian General in command of an Australian division the rest were BRITISH.

After the Battle it proved impossible to identify even one of the Australian dead, four hundred and ten of the Australians were after the armistice buried in the VC Corner Australian Cemetery two mile north west of Fromelles on the road to Sailly.

Due to the lack of identification, no headstones have been erected instead a wall has been erected upon which is inscribed the names of the 1298 Australians who perished during the Battle.

314 of those lost belonged to the 60th Battalion. 241 to the 59th Battalion. 190 to the 53rd. 163 to the 32nd. 373 to other Infantry Battalions. 11 to the Machine Gun Corps and 6 to the Engineers.

French cavalry and the 2nd Royal Irish captured the village of Fromelles on the 17th October 1914, but when the trench warfare began it was behind the German lines. VC Corner was the name given to the crossing of the Rue Delvas and the Rue du Bois, about 3 kilometres North-West of Fromelles village and within the British lines.

On the morning of the 19th July 1916, after a preliminary bombardment, the 5^h Australian and the 61st (South Midland) Divisions undertook what is

officially known as the Attack at Fromelles, advancing from the Rue Tilleloy near Picantin.

The 61st Division attacked but failed with the loss of over 1,000 Officers and men from the 3,410 who took part in the attack. The action was broken off on the morning of the 20th , after the 5th Australian Division had lost 5,533 Officers and men. It was the first serious engagement of the Australian Forces in France, and the only one that achieved no success.

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Private JAMES DAVID CAIRNS.

No 3273A

53rd Inf Batt KIA Fromelles, July 19, 1916

James (Jim) David Cairns was born at Balmain in May 1894, the second son of Robert and Annie Elizabeth (nee Gorman) Cairns. He was working as a Ships Fireman when he enlisted in the AIF on the 28th July 1915 aged 21 years 2 months. 5 foot 9 ½ inches tall, 10 stone in weight he had served 2 years in the Senior Cadets and 2 years in the 29th Infantry. He was Church of England.

No 3273A Private J. D. Cairns, embarked on 2 November 1915, aboard the 15,050 ton vessel. His Majesties Australian Transport, A14 HMAT Euripides with the 11th reinforcements for the 2nd Battalion.

In Egypt he was drafted as one of the 'original's' of the 53rd Battalion which was formed at Zeitoun in Egypt on the 16th February 1916. And taken into the Battalion three days later at Tel-el-Kabir. The 53rd became known as The Whale Oil Guards as they polished their helmets with the Whale Oil issued to them to apply to their feet to prevent frostbite.

The 53rd then became part of the 14th Infantry Brigade of the newly formed 5th Division, stationed on the Suez Canal until 19 June 1916 when it sailed for France, on board "Royal George" arriving at Marseilles on 28 June.

On 1 July 1916 the allies launched an attack north of the River Somme. In order to create a diversion from the planned attack by three Australian Divisions on Pozieres, and

discourage the Germans from moving troops from Fromelles to reinforce those at Pozieres, General Sir Douglas Haig and the British staff decided that a strong attack would be made at Fromelles (80 Klm North of the Somme.)

The French cavalry and the 2nd Royal Irish had captured the village of Fromelles on the 17th October 1914, but when the trench warfare began it was behind the German lines.

The Australian Chief of Staff, Brudenell-White who had opposed this plan, had forecast this tactic would end in tragedy two days before it took place.

He [Brudenell-White] had been appalled by the lack of preparation and planning on the part of the British Corps to which the Australians were attached. He believed a prolonged artillery bombardment by the British Artillery would produce the required result.

Haig in rejecting this suggestion is quoted as saying "I find some of the Australian divisional Generals so ignorant, and like many colonials so conceited that they cannot be trusted to work out unaided the plans of attack". Then added "I visited General Sir Hubert Gough commander of the 4th British Army after lunch to make sure that the Australians were only given a simple task,"

The German advantage came from the fact that they had had 15 months to prepare their defences on high ground, while any surprise attack was foiled in the days before the Battle as the enemy watched the Australians move forward their ammunition, food and water.

Haig believed the thought of being attacked would further delay the withdrawal of troops to reinforce the Germans at Pozieres.

For the Australians who had only 5 days to prepare for the Battle of Fromelles, it was a bitter introduction to the chaotic savagery of warfare on the Western front.

8 July saw Jim charged with a Breach of Discipline and sentenced on 13 July to 168 hours (7 days) detention, this must have been deferred as he was killed while fighting on 19 July.

He entered the firing line after dark on Sunday 16 July and was continually fired on by the German Machine guns and artillery, as this heavy fire continued on the Monday a large number of those in A and B companies of the 53rd were hit.

On Tuesday 18th the constant artillery fire eased during the day but resumed to its full intensity during the night.

At 6pm on Wednesday 19th July following a heavy but ineffective seven-hour artillery bombardment the 5th Division

flanked by the British 61st (South Midland) Division were ordered to penetrate the trenches occupied by the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment. They were given two drinks of rum to brace their nerves before they went over the top at 5.43 in the evening. Each man, beside his equipment and rifle, carried either a spade or a pick and a roll of matting to help cross the barbed wire. Many with a mate carried 8ft wooden scaling ladders.

A corporal serving with the Bavarian Regiment was Adolf Hitler.

Many Australians had been killed or wounded while forming up in their lines by the heavy German shelling that followed the cessation of the British Bombardment which itself had also caused many casualties as many of their shells fell short.

The 61st which was heavily hit by enemy artillery and machine gun fire faltered, as did the 15th Brigade who were cut down by heavy machine gun fire from the enemy.

Due to the ineffectiveness of the British Artillery bombardment the enemy was able to return to their guns immediately the bombardment ceased and were waiting as the 15th emerged from what had once been an orchard.

During the night the 8th Brigade (made up of men from the 29th, 30th, 31st, 32nd) and the 14th Infantry Brigade (made up of men from the 53rd, 54th, 55th and 56th Battalions) had captured 1000 yards of the enemy's front trench. Early the next morning the enemy drove the 8th from their section of the captured trench by a fierce counter attack. At 8am the 14th were ordered to withdraw from the trenches they still occupied.

An informal truce was observed by the Australians and the Bavarians to bring in their wounded who littered 'No Mans Land' between the opposing trenches. This truce was made possible through the initiative of Major A V Murdock who walked towards the enemy trenches with a home made Red Cross flag in his hand while giving drinks the wounded.

On reaching the enemy trenches he arranged a truce with a Bavarian officer, offering himself as a hostage. Three hundred wounded were brought to safety before an Australian Major General McCay called off the truce.

The 53rd Battalion fighting as part of the 14th brigade lost 190 killed in action and had 435 wounded one of those killed was 22 year old Jimmy Cairns.

His father Robert anxious for news of his son sought information from the Army on the 17th September 1916 asking if his son was alive, dead or a prisoner of war.

He was not listed as missing until the 28th September 1916, his allotment of 4 Shillings (40 cents) per day that he had deducted from his pay and paid to his mother was stopped on the 29th of October 1916.

His parents were not notified of his death until the 15th September 1917. At which time his mother was asked to pay back the 40c per day she had been paid from the time of his death, till the time her allowance was stopped. (102 Days).

After the Battle it proved impossible to identify many of the 1298 Australian dead, the unidentified bodies of four hundred and ten Australians, one of whom was James Cairns were after the Armistice buried in the VC Corner Australian Cemetery 3kms north west of Fromelles village on the road to Saily.

Due to the lack of identification, no headstones have been erected instead a wall has been erected upon which is inscribed the names of the 1299 Australians who perished during the Battle.

During the Battle of Fromelles the 5th Division suffered 5,533 casualties. Of those who died 314 were from the 60th Battalion who fought with the 15th Brigade. 241 from the 59th Battalion. (15th.) 190 from the 53rd. (14th) 163 from the 32nd who fought as part of the 8th Brigade. 152 from the 54th 221 from other Infantry Battalions. 11 from the Machine Gun Corps and 6 from the Engineers.

The Australian memorial Park at Fromelles is constructed in the area of the trench, which was captured by the 14th Australian Brigade [Jim's Brigade] and held overnight on the 19-20 July 1916. The Park is near VC Corner Cemetery, in northern France, about 8 kms south of Armentieres.

A sculpture depicting No 3101 Sergeant Simon Fraser of the 57th Battalion who rescued many of the wounded that night, carrying them on his back from the battlefield is a feature of the park.

5 November 1921 Robert Cairns received his sons medals the 1914/15 Star? British War Medal and Victory Medal. A year later 11 November 1922 Robert signed a form which allowed Annie to collect his Memorial Plaque.

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