

## **Abstract**

This document elaborates on the official record of the military service of Alfred Robert “Alf” Macdonald (Serial Number 2411) by including information on the localities where he saw service and the momentous military operations in which he and his parent units participated.

Alf in 1915 enlisted with the AIF for service abroad in WWI and saw action with the 5th Infantry Battalion in Gallipoli. On his return to Egypt, Alf joined the 57<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion on its formation at Tel-El-Kebir. The 57th Infantry Battalion was raised in Egypt on 18 February 1916 as part of the "doubling" of the AIF. Half of its recruits were Gallipoli veterans from the 5th Battalion, and the other half, fresh reinforcements from Australia. In June 1916, the battalion moved from Egypt to France as part of the deployment of the Australian divisions to the Western Front. This led to Alf participating in some of the most significant actions on the Western Front involving Australian troops from mid-1916 to the end of hostilities in 1918.

These included the battles of Fromelles (July 1916), Villers-Bretonneux (April 1918), Peronne (September 1918) and breaching of the Hindenburg Line (September 1918). At Villers– Bretonneux, Alf was gassed while taking part in the legendary counter-attack on 25 April “Anzac Day” 1918 by the 15th Brigade led by General Pompey Elliot that recaptured the town and turned the tide of the war. Alf was wounded for a second time at the Battle for the St Quentin Canal on 29 September 1918.

Alf became a senior Non Commissioned Officer and was promoted to the rank of Lance Sergeant in the field in France in 1916. He served much of 1917 on detachment with the 15th Training Brigade at Tidworth in England and received training as a Lewis gunner.

Alf rejoined the Army during World War 2 (Serial No: VX 101279) but did not see overseas service.

## Enlistment for WWI

**27 April 1915** – At the age of 18 years and 1 months, Alf signs up with the AIF and undergoes induction and recruit training at Broadmeadows Army Depot in Victoria. Born in SwanHill, NSW, in 1897, Alf was working as a labourer before his enlistment

**28 May 1915** - Alf is assigned to the 5th Infantry Battalion 7th Reinforcement.

**16 July 1915** - Alf embarks in Melbourne with fellow members of the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion 7<sup>th</sup> Reinforcement on HMAT A64 “Demosthenes”. Ref: Unit Embarkation Nominal Rolls 1914-1918 War.

## Egypt and Gallipoli

**18 Oct 1915** - Alf embarks at Alexandria for overseas on HT Borda.

**3 Nov 1915** - The 7<sup>th</sup> Reinforcement of 104 soldiers arrives at **SARPI** Base Camp on **LEMNOS ISLAND** and Alf is taken on the strength of the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion

**16 November 1915** - Alf lands at Williams Pier, **ANZAC** and marches to **WHITE VALLEY**

**17 November 1915** - The 5th Battalion takes over the firing line in the trenches at **ANZAC** from B3 to B11 end of **SILT SPUR**

**17 - 27 November 1915** - The Battalion suffers sporadic casualties and an incidence of sickness.

**29 November 1915** - Snow begins to fall on the diggers.

**1 December 1915** - The 5th Battalion is reported as still occupying the trenches on **SILT SPUR**

**6 December 1915** - Turkish Patrol observed moving into **COOEE GULLY**; sniping and bombing.

Heavy bombardment of **COOEE GULLY** by the diggers Naval support

**7 December 1915** - The 5th Battalion suffers one officer and 26 Other Ranks killed. The Battalion's sector of the front experiences heavy shelling with approximately 50 enemy shells coming over.

**11 December 1915** - The 5th Battalion hands over the trenches to the 7th Battalion and, late in the day, withdraws from ANZAC and embarks on board the SS Abyssia.

**12 December 1915** - The 5th Battalion arrives at **SARPI** camp on the island of **LEMNOS**. The effective strength of the battalion at this time is 24 Officers and 560 other ranks

**3 January 1916** The 5th Battalion leaves SARPI camp for **ALEXANDRIA** on the SS Empress of Britain.

**6 January 1916** The 5th Battalion arrived **ALEXANDRIA** and departs for **TEL-EL-KEBIR** camp

**7 Jan 1916** The 5th Battalion disembarks from SS Empress of Britain at **ALEXANDRIA**

**24 January 1916** The 5th Battalion entrains for **SERAPEUM**

**17 February 1916** - Four officers and 392 other ranks including Alf leave to join the 57<sup>th</sup> Battalion on its formation at **TEL-EL-KEBIR**.

The 57th Battalion was raised in Egypt on 18 February 1916 as part of the "doubling" of the AIF. Half of its recruits were Gallipoli veterans from the 5th Battalion, and the other half, fresh reinforcements from Australia. Reflecting the composition of the 5th, the 57th was predominantly composed of men from the suburbs of Melbourne. The battalion became part of the 15th Brigade of the 5th Australian Division.

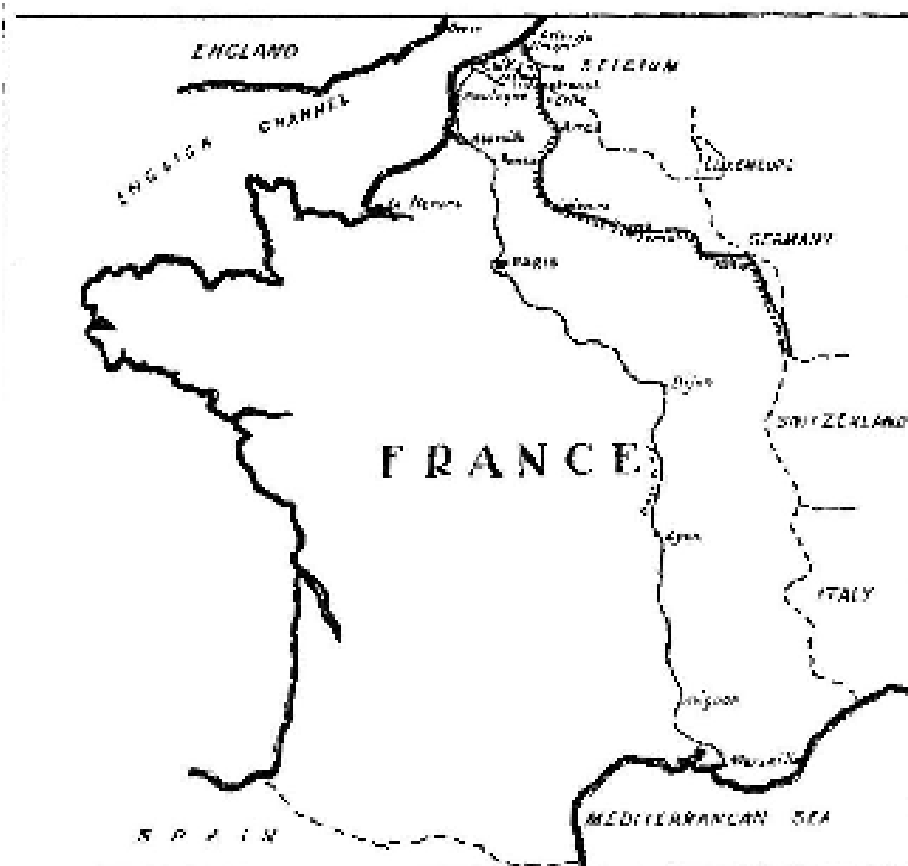
**19 Feb 1916** Alf is taken on the strength of the 57<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion at **SERAPEUM** in Egypt. The unit was under the temporary command of Major Stewart. Brigadier General Harold E "Pompey" Elliott assumes command of the 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade in March 1916.

### Move to France & Western Front

**17 June 1916** - Alf embarks on HT Kalyan at Alexandria for sea journey to France to join the British Expeditionary Force.

**25 June 1916** - Alf disembarks at **MARSEILLES** in France after a sea voyage under conditions which are generally described by Ellis as ideal.

**23/30 June 1916** - Disembarkation and entrainment of the Division in **MARSEILLES** continued over the period. The train journey took the Division through the enchanting French countryside to



MAP SHOWING (A) RAILWAY JOURNEY FROM MARSEILLES TO MAZEDONCK  
(B) APPROXIMATE FRONT LINE AT END OF JUNE 1916

## The Somme Campaign and the Battle of Fromelles

**1 July 1916** - The 5th Division arrives in **ABBEVILLE** in Northern France on the day of commencement of the **SOMME** campaign.

**2 July 1916** - The 5th Division leaves **ABBEVILLE** for **HAZEBROUCK**

**10/11 July 1916** - The Fifth Division takes over a four mile section of the front line about three miles south of **ARMENTIERES**.

**17 July 1916** - Preparatory to the attack, the 57<sup>th</sup> and 58<sup>th</sup> battalions are in the front line preparing to “hop the bags” as the assault battalions. A two day deferral of the attack, which was initially scheduled for the 17<sup>th</sup> July, causes the commander of the 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade, General Pompey Elliot, to reallocate the assault role from the 57<sup>th</sup> and 58<sup>th</sup> battalions to the fresher 59<sup>th</sup> and 60<sup>th</sup> battalions.

**19 July 1916 - FROMELLES**, seventy kilometres north of the battle of the Somme, was the site of the first major Australian operation on the Western Front and embroiled the 57th Battalion without the benefit of an introduction to the trenches in a "quiet" sector. The attack there on 19 July 1916 by the 5<sup>th</sup> Division and the British 61<sup>st</sup> Division was intended to discourage the Germans from withdrawing troops from this area and sending them south to the battle raging on the Somme.

The attack failed to achieve its tactical objective of capturing the German trenches but did serve to delay the redeployment of German troops south to the Somme for several weeks. For the attacking troops, the battle was a disaster with 7000 killed and wounded. 5533 of these were Australians, making 19 July 1916 the bloodiest day in Australian military history.

Of the 1750 men who went forward from the two assault battalions, no fewer than 1452 died or were wounded. Alfred and his mates in the 57<sup>th</sup> Battalion had a supporting role and suffered relatively light casualties compared to their sister battalions. This, however, meant that 57th carried the burden of holding the line in ensuing days for the Division.

**August - September 1916** - The 5th Division, despite its grievous losses at Fromelles, continues to man the front in the vicinity of **ARMENTIERES** for nearly three months following and is reinforced in September.

**2 August 1916** - Alf is promoted to Corporal while in the field in France.

Aside: Alf could have encountered his uncle WO Robert Bruce Macdonald who served with the 5<sup>th</sup> Division Train.

**October 1916** - Winter is spent on the **SOMME** with the Division holding the line without undertaking any major operation in the vicinity of **FLERS** and **GEUEDECOURT** (Ellis, 1919). An insight into the terrible conditions prevailing on the Somme front around **FLERS** in

1916 is provided in the following observation by Cotterill:

“... no pen could ever adequately describe the misery and privations of the men holding the line. The trenches were ghastly ditches full of water and mud, and the decomposing remains of heroes of already forgotten battles ... Rain fell nearly every day, there was no drainage, and the weather was too cold for anything to dry ... mud was the God of this sector ... in looking back the troops have only one horrible memory of Flers, and that is of the mud. It was as if the whole region had wilted under the terrific strain put upon it, and as if the backbone had gone out of the land, leaving only a soft, viscous mass for the troops to die in,” (Ref: Cotterill, in Walter Belford, Legs–Eleven, Being the Story of the 11th Battalion (AIF) in the Great War of 1914–1918, Perth, 1940, p.360–1)

**23 October 1916** - Alf is promoted to the rank of Lance Sergeant while in the field in France.

**17 December 1916** - The 57th Battalion is manning the front line in **RIEBMONT** and suffering a high rate of illness.

**23 January 1917** - Alf is admitted to No. 36 Casualty Clearing Station in France suffering from Venereal Disease and is hospitalised for 61 days following.

**4 April 1917** - Alf rejoins his unit. At the time of his return the Fifth Division has just captured the French villages of **DOIGNES & LOUVERAL** as part of a general advance towards the **HINDENBURG LINE**.

**2 April 1917** - The French villages of **DOIGNES & LOUVERAL** are captured in successful sequential attacks by a Brigade of the 5th Division. The action which incurred 474 casualties is later cited as a major action for the period by Sir Douglas Haig, the British commander-in-chief.

**28 April 1917** Alf is detached to the 15<sup>th</sup> Training Battalion for Duty

**2 May 1917** - Alf leaves France and marches in to the 15<sup>th</sup> Training Battalion at **HURDCOTT** in England.

**3 July to 28 July 1917** Alf attends a training course at the School of Musketry at **TIDWORTH** and qualifies as 2<sup>nd</sup> Class with a fair working knowledge of the Lewis Gun. This machine gun helped make up for the depleted ranks of the Division and its use contributed greatly to the success of the Division in engagements over the last year or so of the war. Following this training, Alf serves on the permanent cadre of the 15<sup>th</sup> Training Battalion at **TIDWORTH**

**23 October 1917** Next of Kin advice reflects Alf's marriage to:

Mrs May Beatrice Macdonald;  
Keepers Cottage; Nobles Napp,  
Yeovil,  
Somerset

**16 Nov 1917** - Alf rejoins the 57th Battalion from his detachment to the 15<sup>th</sup> Training Battalion. At this time, the 5th Division is operating around the **DRANOUTRE** area in the **MESSINES – WYTSCHAETE** sector in Northern France

**21 March 1918** - The Great German offensive (Operation Michael) is launched with 64 German Divisions conducting the attack

**25 March 1918** - Orders are received to move the Fifth Division to the Somme District as reports come in of “English soldiers retreating” in the face of the German offensive.

**4 April 1918** - The Fifth Division is ordered to proceed immediately to the **BLANGY TRON-VILLE** area and to relieve the British Divisions located there.

**5 April 1918** - The Divisional front extends from just east of **VAIRE-SUR-SOMME** to **VILLERS BRETTONEUX**.

**9 April 1918** - The Second Great German offensive opens between **ARMENTIERES** and **LA BASSE**.

**23 April 1918** - The village of **VILLERS BRETTONEUX** and the areas around it are drenched with gas.

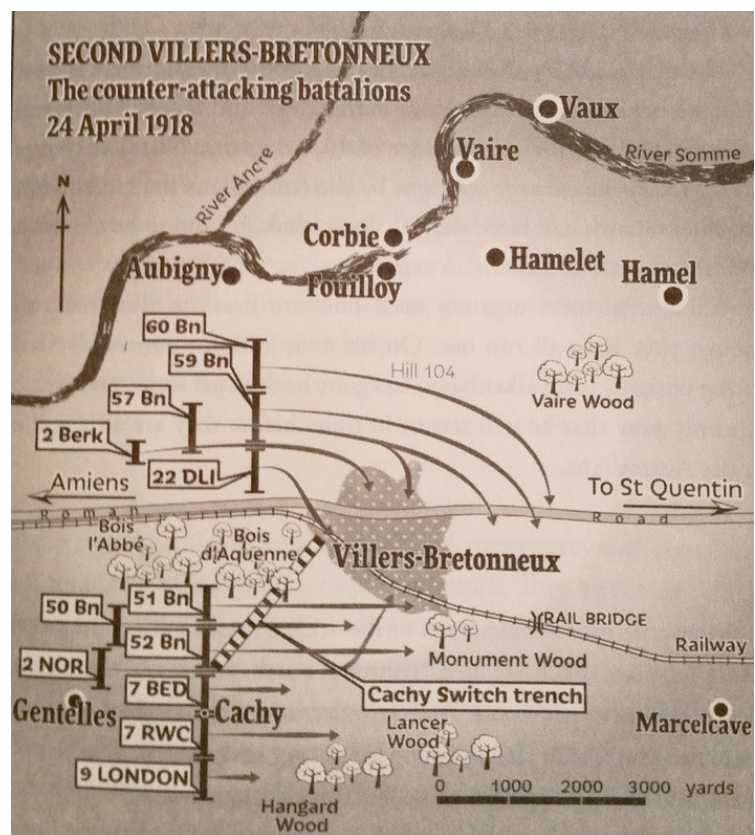
## Battle of Villers Bretonneux

**24/25 April 1918** - Following heavy artillery preparation, a German attack is launched on the French village of **VILLERS BRETTONEUX** that sees the village captured .

**25 April “Anzac Day” 1918** - The 15th Brigade under General Pompey Elliot launches a successful and now legendary counter-attack and succeeds in recapturing the town. The 57th Infantry Battalion is one of the three Australian Battalions who carried out the counterattack. The brutal nature of the fighting at Villers Brettoneux is well captured in Fitzsimons (2016). The figure shows the path taken by Alf’s battalion during this heroic counter-attack.

The Division’s casualties of around 150 are wonderfully light according to Ellis (1919). The decisive victory at **VILLERS BRETTONEUX** denies the Germans the chance to cut off the combined British Forces supply line and marks the end of the German advance towards **AMIENS**.

Alf is wounded (gassed) in action on this historical day.



**Map showing the path taken by the 57th Infantry Battalion during the counter-attack at Villers-Bretonneux (Ref: Fitzsimons, 2016)**



**27 April 1918** - Alf is in the LOC Hospital, suffering from the effects of gas poisoning.

**23 August 1918** - Alf rejoins his Battalion which is advancing following the successful Allied offensive in which it participated at **AMIENS**.

## Battle of Peronne

**1-2 September 1918** - Alf's Battalion is instrumental in the capture of the town of **PERONNE** which had been turned into a fort and was the last major German stronghold before the **HINDENBURG LINE**.

## Breaching of the Hindenburg Line

**29 September 1918** - Alf is wounded in action for a second time on the day that the allies under Monash's command launched massive attack by 200,000 troops aimed at breaching the formidable German defences along the **ST QUENTIN CANAL** near the French town of **BELLICOURT**. The attack is conducted by the 5th and 3rd Australian Divisions, in cooperation with American forces. A flanking operation in the afternoon by the 5th Division is instrumental to the day's success and the capture of the **BELLICOURT** tunnel and the first two **HINDENBURG LINE** trench systems. This campaign represents the 57th Battalion's last major battle of the war.

**1 October 1918** - Alf is invalided out to the UK

**2 October 1918** Alf is admitted to the Beaufort War Hospital in **BRISTOL** in England. The same day, the 57<sup>th</sup> Battalion withdraws from the front line to rest and is still doing so when the war ends on 11 November 1918.

**11 November 1918** - Date of Armistice

## Return to Australia

**20 June 1919** - Alf embarks in England with his wife for their return to Australia on HT Konig Frederich August.

**6 August 1919** - Alf disembarks at 3MD

**5 October 1919** - Date of discharge

After the war Alf becomes station manager at Murray Downs Station near Swan Hill. Lives in Fitzroy towards the end. Alf rejoins the Army for WW2 (SERV VX 101279) but does not see overseas service.

**1962** Alf dies in Swan Hill Victoria.

## Medals

1. 1914/1915 Star
2. Victory Medal
3. British War Medal

## References:

1. First Australian Imperial Force Personnel Dossiers (WWI Service Records) Series B2455 - Macdonald Alfred Robert - SERN 2411. National Archives of Australia.
2. AWM4 Australian Imperial Force War Diaries 1914-1918 War
  - Subclass 23/22 - 5th Infantry Battalion
  - Subclass 23/74 - 57th Infantry Battalion
3. Ellis, A.D. The Story of the Fifth Australian Division; Being an Authoritative Account of the Division's Doings in Egypt, France and Belgium. Houghton & Stodder, London 1919.
4. Corfield, R.S. Hold hard, cobbers: The story of the 57th and 60th and 57/60th Australian Infantry Battalions 1912-1990, Volume I 1912-1930, (Glenhuntly: 57/60th Bn (AIF) Association, 1992).
5. Fitzsimons, Peter. Victory at Villers-Bretonneux. William Heinemann, Australia. 2016