

## Trooper/Gunner Joseph Henry Walter Eddy

### Rod Martin

A twenty-one year-old munitions worker from Charles Street, Ascot Vale, Joe Eddy enlisted as a bachelor on 30 April 1917. He had military experience: four years in school cadets and then two years in the 58 Infantry (militia) Battalion. At 185 centimetres, Joe was quite tall for the time, but also quite lean, weighing just under sixty-four kilos. He completed his training at Seymour and was then assigned to 4 Light Horse Regiment.

On 8 August 1917, Joe embarked on A68 HMAT *Anchises* in Sydney. He may have left from there because he was by that time either married, engaged to or in a relationship with a woman named Gladys, who hailed from Barooga in New South Wales. It is likely that he spent some time with Gladys at Barooga before leaving for overseas. He may have arranged with the war department to leave from Sydney rather than travelling back to Melbourne to board a ship.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

PB0100

Troops boarding HMAT *Anchises* at Port Melbourne in 1916

(AWM PB0100)

The *Anchises* sailed via the Cape of Good Hope and arrived in Liverpool, England, on 2 October. Along with other troops, Joe was conveyed to Lark Hill training establishment on Salisbury Plain. While there, on 7 October, he transferred to 14 Field Artillery Brigade (FAB) and thus became a gunner. The reasons for the transfer are unknown. The Light Horse did operate on the Western Front but, because of the often devastated terrain, seemed to be used more for forward reconnaissance, policing and guarding, rather than fighting. Did Joe want to be more actively involved, was he persuaded to move to the artillery – or was there another reason?

On 18 November, the newly assigned gunner was allotted three days of Field Punishment Number Two (hard labour) for neglecting to obey an order from headquarters that was issued the previous June. What the order was is not detailed in Joe's record. Perhaps he just forgot what the order was about!

Now a gunner and supporting 5 Division in its endeavours, Joe sailed for France on 23 November 1917. At that time, 14 FAB was located near Ypres, in Belgium. It had been involved in the successful 'bite and hold' attack at Polygon Wood in late September. After that, 5 Division was relieved and spared the bitter fighting that took place later in an effort to capture the village of Passchendaele. By the time the village was finally taken – by Canadian troops – in November, the Third Battle of Ypres, that had Passchendaele as its initial target, had lost momentum and was fizzling out as winter was coming on.

When Joe joined 14 FAB, it was somewhere in the vicinity of Ypres, helping to hold the line. Each FAB had six eighteen-pounder field gun batteries, each having four guns, and one 4.5 inch howitzer battery, possessing six guns. The howitzer was a cannon, designed to fire a heavier shell over a shorter distance, at a low or high trajectory.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

REL46223

4.5 inch Howitzer

(AWM REL46223)

On 6 December, Joe was assigned to the FAB's 114 howitzer Battery. While the front was relatively quiet at that time, bombardments from both sides were still occurring, and 114 Battery was in action on a regular basis until 20 December, when the FAB went into rest at Doulieu, just over the border in northern France. It stayed there until the end of January 1918 and then began moving north again, towards Belgium, arriving near Messines (south of Ypres) on 4 February and taking over gun positions from 2 FAB. The brigade's war diary described the situation as being 'quiet'.

However, all six howitzers were in action that day, along with eighteen of the field guns. By the next day, all the guns were in action. Joe and his new compatriots had a solo turn the day after that, being called to fire on a German working party, causing it to quickly disperse.

114 Battery was called into such actions as this several times during February and, on the twenty-seventh of the month, was asked by the infantry to fire on a German *minenwerfer* mortar that was causing trouble. It was silenced as a result.



A *minenwerfer* (Deloraine, Tasmania)

(Rod Martin)



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

C04390

A howitzer of 11 FAB, Ravine Wood, Belgium, 1917-18.

(AWM C04390)

The reported casualty figure for the battery in February was nil. This good luck continued into March, despite regular barrages from the German side. For its part, 114 Battery supported a number of night-time raiding parties, as well as bombarding ones emanating from the enemy lines. On 6 March, it bombarded a suspected German battalion headquarters with gas shells.

The luck could not last, however. Towards the end of the month, German activity increased substantially and, on 21 March 1918, enemy shellfire on the brigade's wagon lines killed one man, injured nine others and killed twelve horses. As it turned out, this increased activity on the part of the Germans heralded their last great offensive, Operation Michael, which began in the Somme Valley in France on that same day. By 25 March, the brigade had already received notification that its guns were to be taken out of the line in anticipation of a move into France to reinforce the beleaguered troops there. Two days later, the move occurred and the brigade headed southward. After an eighteen-hour railway journey, the men reached the French town of Orville, north of the important railway junction at Amiens – one of the Germans' principal targets. The brigade had lost four men killed and fourteen wounded during the month.

The beginning of April saw the brigade in reserve. By the sixth, however, it had moved to the village of Bonnav, north of Villers-Bretonneux, and the batteries took up position in very wet conditions, covering 5 Division infantry. At times over the next few days and nights, 14 FAB bombarded areas where the German troops appeared to be massing for attacks. The Germans retaliated with their own bombardments, machine gun fire and strafing and bombing by aeroplanes. On 11 April, four men of 114 Battery were wounded by the premature explosion of one of their shells. It would appear from Joe's war record, however, that he was not one of the injured men.

During this time, 14 FAB appeared to be moving in a south-easterly direction, sometimes bombarding the German positions near the town of Hamel. On 21 April, German aircraft were very active. One was shot down by Lewis machine gunners of 53 Battery, a part of 14 FAB. The pilot, who was killed, proved to be Manfred von Richthofen – the Red Baron. The next day, another enemy aeroplane shot down crashed in front of the batteries.

On 24 April 1918, the brigade commander reported in the war diary that there was heavy shelling from the Germans, targeted particularly on 53 Battery, which suffered heavy casualties among the men and horses. The rest of 14 FAB was not targeted that day but, on its right, the British 8 Division was driven back, and the Germans occupied Villers-Bretonneux. At 10.00 that night, an Australian counter-attack carried out by 13 and 15 Brigades (Pompey Elliott's unit) succeeded in recapturing the village. It would appear that 14 FAB was involved in this action, as the war diary records the following casualty list: one lieutenant and nine other ranks gassed; six other ranks killed and thirty-nine wounded; seventy-one horses and twelve mules killed; forty-six horses and three mules wounded, and one gun damaged by shellfire.

The recapture of Villers-Bretonneux, on the fourth Anzac Day, marked the end of the last German offensive. From that point on, the war would see the consolidation of the allied positions in France, and a gradual build-up of forces in preparation for counter-attacks and then the 'Big Push' of 8 August 1918.





AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E02158

The ruined church at Villers-Bretonneux (targeted by 14 FAB), April 1918 (AWM E02158)

The first major counter-attack was the one at Hamel on 4 July, involving Australian 4 Division and American troops, and planned and executed by Sir John Monash. The battle was won in just over ninety minutes. Supporting 5 Division as it did, 14 FAB did not take part in this action. Instead, along with other Australian forces, it participated in what Richard Travers describes as ‘. . . the tactic of ‘peaceful penetration’, in which they cut off and capture[d] small segments of the German lines by stealth attacks, made under cover of the local crops and trees.’

5 August found the brigade located near Villers-Bretonneux, ready for the big offensive three days hence. On the eighth, at 4.20 am, along with many other batteries, it put down a barrage in support of the operation, and fired for several hours, covering the advance of tanks and infantry.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ART12208

H. Septimus Power: 8 August 1918 © Australian War Memorial (ART 12208)

By 8.00 am, the first objective of the Battle of Amiens had been taken.

As part of the attack, 14 FAB's batteries pushed forward, reaching Gillancourt and taking up position there by the end of the day. The advance had not been without its casualties, however. Heavy German counter-fire had caused the deaths of five soldiers, and seven were wounded. Twenty-one animals were killed or wounded by enemy bombs and shellfire. This pattern, predicated by regular infantry advances, was to repeat itself over the next few weeks, the men having short breaks before returning to the lines for more bombardments. On 20 August, 114 Howitzer Battery was involved in shelling a fortified house, causing a number of direct hits.

On the twenty-fourth, the brigade was ordered to go into reserve near Hamel. Whilst on the way out of the battle zone, however, the 53 Battery column was bombed, causing three men killed and eight wounded, along with casualties amongst the horses and mules. Whether this had anything to do with Joe's appointment as a driver ('to complete establishment') two days later we do not know. The evidence does not discount the possibility, however. It may be that, as a former light horseman, Joe was seen as being a ready replacement for a driver who had been injured or killed. Henceforth, he was driving horses and mules as they hauled the guns along in support of the advancing infantry.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E03563

114 Battery column, drawn by mules, France, 13 October 1918. (AWM E03563)

By the beginning of September 1918, Monash's forces had advanced and taken Mont St. Quentin and Peronne – both without artillery or tanks. Along with 5 Division, 14 FAB moved steadily forward during the month, having brief rests and then engaging the Germans again, The enemy, by this time clearly losing the war, strongly resisted nevertheless, inflicting sometimes very heavy casualties on the Allies. By 29 September, Monash was ready to attack the Canal du Nord and the defensive Hindenburg Line, using 3 and 5 Divisions and associated American troops, in what was to become the Australian infantry's last battle of the war. The attack started with a creeping barrage at 3.00 am. 14 FAB was not involved at that time. By 9.00 am,

the Americans had taken the Hindenburg support line. At 3.00 in the afternoon, 14 FAB's batteries were firing in support of Pompey Elliott's 15 Brigade in an attack near Bellicourt.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ART03517

Arthur Streeton: The entrance to the St. Quentin Tunnel at Bellicourt.

(AWM ART 03517)

Casualties on that day were high. Two men were killed, twelve wounded, seven horses and six mules killed and twelve wounded. Two howitzers were damaged by shellfire.

The attack on the Canal du Nord was a difficult one, the Australians having to change their strategies on a number of occasions in the face of strong German resistance. By 5 October, however, they had created the opportunity for 2 Division to attack Montbrehain and succeed. The infantry was then replaced by American troops. However, the artillery was called upon to provide support for those troops and British ones, and we find 14 FAB still in action, and still suffering casualties, as late as 23 October. On the evening of that day, the guns and personnel were withdrawn to the wagon lines. Their war was finally over.

At the end of the year, along with many others, Joe was granted leave until January 1919. He remained in France until 22 May, when he was transferred to Weymouth in England. Perhaps he got bored while waiting to be repatriated because, on 11 June, he went absent without leave and did not return to camp until 2 July. For this he forfeited forty-two days' pay. He probably was not the only man to take this course of action. Did he have a good enough time while AWOL to justify the loss of this money? We can hope so!

Joe left for Australia on 23 July 1919 and was discharged from the military on 2 October that year. We know from letters he sent to the army that he was back at Barooga by 1923, but had moved to Hampton in Victoria by 1953. Records indicate that he died in 1973.

## Sources

Australian War Memorial

National Archives of Australia

Dennis, Peter *et al*: *The Oxford companion to Australian military history*,  
Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1995

en.wikipedia.org

Google Earth

<https://rslvirtualwarmemorial.org.au>

<http://www.lancers.org.au>

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com>

<http://www.lancers.org.au>

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com>

Travers, Richard: *Diggers in France: Australian soldiers on the Western Front*,  
Sydney, ABC Books, 2008