

Sergeant/Sapper Alfred Thomas George

Rod Martin

The First World War has been described as the first modern industrial war, employing as it did many new and often deadly innovations, including high explosive shells, gas and flame-throwers. When the war changed from conflict in the open field to a system of opposing trenches in late September 1914, infrastructure had to be developed to service the many needs of the troops who faced each other on either side of No Man's Land across many kilometres of front.

One such facility was the light railway, set on often hastily constructed tracks and required to convey food supplies, troops and materiel to and from the battlefield. Open or flat-bottomed wagons carried the various items to the front, pushed or pulled by specially constructed engines.



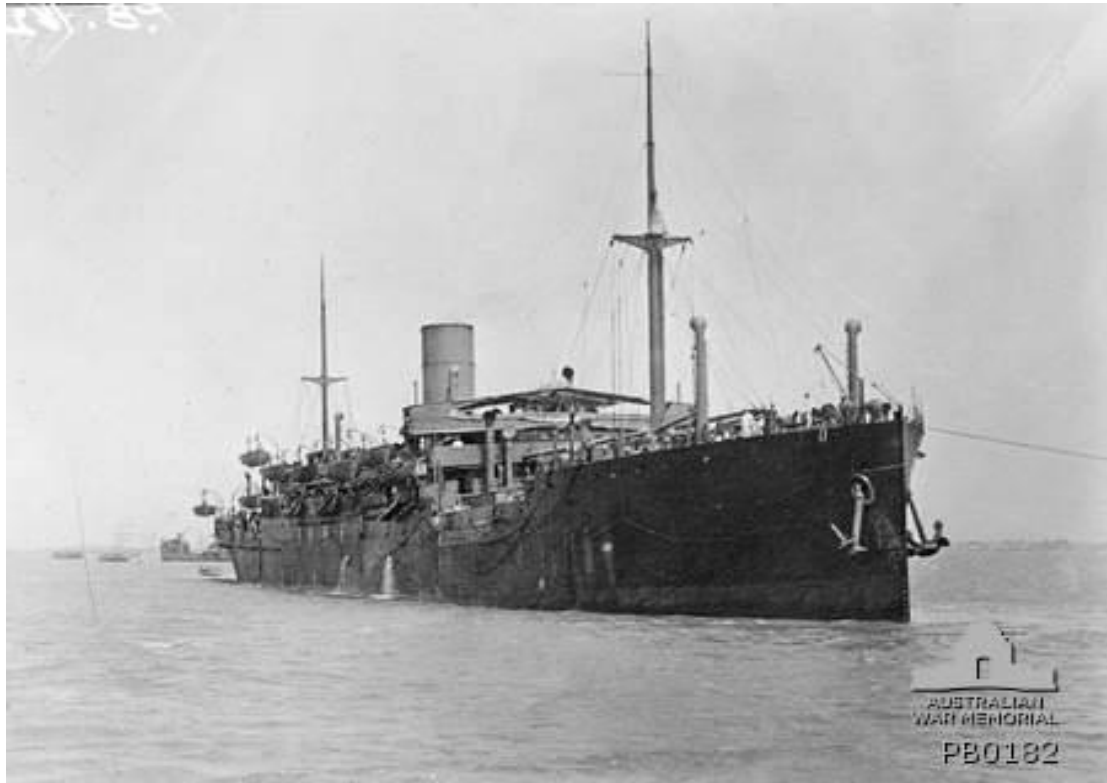
British light rail engine, as used on the Western Front

(AWM H01948)

Men, no doubt preferably skilled and experienced, were needed to drive these trains. In late 1916, at the request of the British government, Australia advertised for experienced men to join a new railway operations division. By the end of January 1917, the Victorian section was filled by 'a very fine body of men' from the Victorian Railways.

One such man was thirty-two-year-old engine driver Alfred George of 37 Hardiman Street, Kensington. He signed on the bottom line on 10 January and was assigned to number 2

Section, Australian Railway Operations Division. Probably because of his role, skills and experience, Alf was immediately assigned the rank of sergeant, did some very basic training at Royal Park and embarked with his colleagues on A70 HMAT *Ballarat* on 19 February.



HMAT *Ballarat* leaving Port Melbourne in 1916

(AWM PB0182)

Sailing via the Cape of Good Hope, *Ballarat* was torpedoed by a German submarine off the Lizard, Cornwall, on Anzac Day 1917. Fortunately, all on board were saved, and Alf and his compatriots arrived at Devonport, near Plymouth, on 28 April. After some further training, the men were conveyed to France on 29 May 1917, reaching the port of Le Havre and spending a few days there. On 2 June, the men entrained and headed north into southern Belgium, alighting at the town of Poperinge. After the allied failure to defeat the Germans in the Battle of the Somme the previous year, British commander Sir Douglas Haig decided to adopt a new strategy and attack the enemy at Ypres. His stated reasons were to capture the German submarine pens on the occupied Belgian coast, thus removing some of the threat to the all-important Atlantic convoys and demoralising the enemy in the process. Two previous battles had been fought at Ypres, in 1914 and 1915, and both ended in expensive stalemates. Haig believed that, with a sufficient build-up of artillery and manpower, the Allies could be successful this time – as long as the weather remained fine. A combination of heavy rain and the notoriously swampy soils in this part of Flanders could lead to a boggy disaster.

To facilitate the movement of men and materiel to various parts of the front, light railways would have to be used extensively. This was the job of Alf and his comrades. However, they did not have a good start. Having reached Poperinge, the unit's commander asked what the military wanted his men to do. The reply was,

'Do as we were told, not a bad start. It began to dawn on me, if this was our beginning what would the end be'.

Moreover, '*not the slightest*' provision had been made for the unit. The officers had to find their own tents and then a place to pitch them. Even when the men completed that task and bedded down, few got any sleep because they were located near the front line and shells were screaming over their heads and exploding all night. What a baptism of fire! And the situation was not helped the next day when the commander was ordered to provide 100 men to unload goods from a broad gauge supply train to light railway trucks.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

C01381

Transferring supplies from the broad gauge train to light railway trucks

(AWM C01381)

The men quickly began complaining, saying that they did not volunteer in order to act as labourers. Despite their complaints, they finished the job – and then were ordered to unload 400 tons of coal! As the commander recorded it, the comment among the men was, '*just fancy men leaving 14/- [shillings] a day in Australia to come here to unload coal . . .*'

On 6 June, the men finally got to look at some engines. According to the commander, they were in a deplorable state, not having been washed out, the fires never cleaned out and the drawn tubes (that carry hot gases from the fire that then heat up the water) blocked up. Alf and his comrades had plenty of maintenance work to do!

On 8 June 1917, twenty drivers and twenty firemen were sent to Ouderdam to assist with the attack on Messines Ridge, which had begun the previous day with the detonation of nineteen huge mines under the German-occupied locations. This was the start of what became known as the Third Battle of Ypres – often labelled incorrectly as the Battle of Passchendaele after the village that was the main target. Whether Alf was one of the drivers we do not know. When the men arrived at Ouderdam they found the engines to be in a disgraceful condition and, basically, they 'jacked up' and complained. The officer in charge removed them from the engines as a result, saying that they would not be used until they could follow orders.

This led to a confrontation between the officer and the commander of the railway unit, the latter saying that the engines were in a disgraceful condition and would not do the work that was required of them.

After much effort in late June, the commander was able to report that the equipment was in much better condition and the engines were able to stay out all day, doing successful work.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E00816

Light rail carrying duckboards for use on the floors of the trenches

(AWM E00816)



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

C01403

Australian troops on light rail trolleys

(AWM C01403)

The unit suffered its first casualty later in the month when a corporal lost a finger when playing with a hand grenade. He was lucky it was only a finger! A far more serious accident occurred on the first day of July. A lieutenant on control duty was run over and his leg broken in two places. The unit commander expressed his opinion that this accident was due to a man being assigned work that he knew nothing about. He had made a comment earlier to the effect that, just because a man is an officer, it does not mean that he could be competent in all possible roles. By this time, the unit was employing eighty engine drivers and firemen, forty guards and several breakdown gangs. It was expanding because many new lines were being built, presumably into the newly occupied territory at Messines. Such expansion also caused problems, however. There were many derailments on the new lines and the ongoing battle led to large numbers of railway trucks being damaged or destroyed. The consequent increase in danger led to the first battle casualty on 16 July when a corporal was wounded and gassed. By the last day of the month, the unit was taking wounded men back to casualty clearing stations as well as taking material and equipment up to the front.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E01134

Repairing light railway track on the battlefield

(AWM E01134)

The second stage of the Third Battle of Ypres began on 31 July – and the rain promptly came down in bucketfuls. The naturally marshy soils of Flanders quickly turned into bogs, swamps and overflowing shell holes. The mud became impassable for both materiel and men. The trains had to do as best they could, and the unit commander reported on 3 August that their coal supply was very low because of the increased demand on the system. A new depot was created at English Wood, not far from Ypres, and the men there came under fire without having any protection. One sapper ran from his train as a result and was remanded for court martial. On 13 August, one of the sappers died of wounds received on the fifth. He was

buried at Poperinge. This was the unit's first fatality, and a large number attended the funeral.

The railway unit was employed extensively during the remainder of the attack on Passchendaele. In late September, it assisted troops who made successful assaults at Menin Road and Polygon Wood, and then at Broodseinde Ridge on 4 October. These attacks were carried out during a brief spell of fine weather. On 6 October, however, rain set in again. On the twelfth, in bad weather, Australian and New Zealand divisions attacked Passchendaele Ridge in shocking conditions. In Richard Travers' words, the attack proved a ridge too far. The ridge and village were finally taken by Canadian troops in November. By that time, however, the locations had lost their strategic value and Haig's grand plan had sunk in a morass of mud, dead bodies and materiel.

During the latter stages of the battle, the railway unit was a clear target for attack by the Germans. On 21 October, its camp was bombed heavily by a German plane. Ten bombs were dropped, killing thirteen men and wounding twenty-four. Fortunately for him, Alf was not among the casualties. Rolling stock and sheds were also damaged.

By the end of the battle, winter had well and truly settled in, and many men were reporting sick. Alf finally succumbed on 5 January 1918, being sent to hospital with laryngitis. He was there until 26 March, and was then sent on leave to England until 6 July. By the time he returned to the front, the unit had returned to France, the Germans' last offensive was over and the Allies, bolstered by American troops, were on the march. The unit had played an important part in the retreat sparked by the German offensive, transporting troops, gun wagons and other supplies, and suffering derailments, engine troubles and lack of water. On 4 July, John Monash turned the tables by successfully launching the Battle of Hamel. It was won in ninety-three minutes.



Light rail tracks on a battlefield

(AWM C01366)

It was around this time that Alf's life began to go off the rails (excuse the pun). Whether it was the drudgery of the work, the loss of the freedom he had had while on leave or the positive effect of Monash's highly successful Battle of Amiens, that began on 8 August, we do not know. Whatever the reason, he was charged with drunkenness on 25 August while based at Abbeville and reprimanded by his commanding officer. Three days later, at his own request, Alf was reduced to the position of sapper. It seems that he could no longer cope with the pressure and responsibilities of rank.

When the Australians' war ended after the Battle of Montbrehain on 5 October 1918, the railway unit was based at Rocquigny, north of Reims in eastern France. It had supported those troops in their seminal battles at Mont St. Quentin, Peronne and the Canal du Nord.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E02768

Near Cardonette, France, July 1918

(AWM E02768)

Now it was time to think about celebrations and going home. However, the light rail units were still in great demand because of the need to move more than two years' worth of equipment back from the front, as well as transporting troops towards the coast prior to them being conveyed to England. As a result of the size of this task, the men were still in France well into 1919. As for Alf, he was there with them, apart from a spell in hospital from 16 October to 13 November, suffering from scabies. The men were now being used as staff for broad gauge lines as well as the light rail ones, and no mention was made by the end of December as to when they would be going home. Up to Christmas, a number of men went on leave to Paris or England, but Alf's record gives no indication that he was one of them. Perhaps this is one reason why he was reported for drunkenness again on 4 December and admonished by his commanding officer.

Worse was to come, however. On 30-31 January 1919, Alf was court-martialled at the Palais de Justice in Courtaai, Belgium. He faced three charges: Shooting at a captain with intent; using violence to his superior officer and going absent without leave between 5 and 6

January. The details of the charges included the fact that threw a piece of iron at a warrant officer. He was found not guilty on the shooting charge, but guilty of the other two, and he was sentenced to ninety days' Field punishment Number Two (hard labour) and he forfeited 116 days' pay. A witness in the court described him as 'behaving like a lunatic.' It may have been better for him if he had been found guilty of shooting at the captain, and received a jail sentence as a result, for worse was come.

Alf completed his field punishment on 5 June 1919. By that time, however, he was in jail as a result of another crime. On 1 March 1919, he was charged with committing manslaughter while travelling on a ration train to Tincourt in France. According to the evidence presented, he negligently discharged a revolver while drunk, wounding and causing the death of Sapper Richard Stephens. He was found guilty on 19 April and sentenced to seven years' jail, to be served in a government prison.

Alf was sent to Portland Prison in Dorset in May, but was transported to London in August and placed on a ship bound for Australia on the nineteenth of the month. When he arrived in Melbourne, he was transferred to Pentridge Prison to serve the remainder of his sentence. While there, he was discharged from the AIF on 13 November. However, as the result of a report from the officer in charge on the ship to Australia, to the effect that Alf's conduct during the voyage had been 'exemplary', a recommendation was made that his sentence should be ameliorated because of his good behaviour. He was duly released from Pentridge on 10 July 1920.

What happened to Alf after that we do not know. Was he able to return to the Victorian Railways and resume his occupation, or was he ostracised by that body because of his prison sentence? What we do know from his record is that, because of that sentence, he forfeited his war medals and, probably, any possibility of a military pension at a later date.

Sources

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