



# HERO ALOYSIUS BOYLAN

29th April 1894 – 1st November 1916 5th Pioneer  
Battalion A.I.F.

Cendall Slattery

by Alyssa Siebert Year 9 Lock Area School

Hero Aloysius Boylan was born on the 29<sup>th</sup> of April, 1894 at Cudlee,<sup>1</sup> near Elliston on the Eyre Peninsula of South Australia. He grew up in the nearby town of Talia, and attended Cudlee Public School. Hero had twelve siblings,<sup>2</sup> of which he was the ninth born to parents Patrick and Hanorah Boylan (nee Cash). He was one of two Boylan brothers to enlist<sup>3</sup>. Hero died of wounds during the Somme Offensive in 1916. Notices of his death describe Hero as a *“a very fine stamp of a young man, 6’1 built in proportion. He had dark auburn curly hair and possessed a bright cheerful deposition.”*<sup>4</sup> Before enlisting, Hero worked on his father’s farm, undertaking farming and shearing work, and was a skilful rider.

Hero embarked on HMT *Aeneas* as part of the 5<sup>th</sup> Pioneer Battalion, an infantry and light engineering unit,<sup>5</sup> on March 11, 1916<sup>6</sup> at the age of 21. After training in Egypt, Hero was transported to the Western Front on board the HMT *Ivernia*, disembarking in Marseilles, France on the 29<sup>th</sup> of June 1916. After disembarking, Hero spent a few days at Lynde where he received further training.

On July 9<sup>th</sup> 1916, after a three day march, the battalion took up its quarters at Bae St Maur, four kilometres from the front line. After a short spell from burying a telephone cable, Hero and his fellow pioneers were ordered to help build a mile of railway to the front line in a matter of just three nights. This task was first thought hopeless due to the amount of material to be bought forward and the number of deep creeks intersecting the country. Further to this, construction was done in spite of the fact that during the second night the “huns”<sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup> carried out one of their periodical “strafes”<sup>9</sup> <sup>10</sup> which at the time were a common experience for the ANZACs. The railway they built was used to bring materials to the battalion for use during the Battle of Fromelles on July 19<sup>th</sup> 1916, which proved to be disastrous for Australia with the loss of 5,533 men and a German victory.<sup>11</sup>

Two of the battalion’s companies<sup>12</sup> (A and D) fought as in the Battle of Fromelles, while a small party of C Coy maintained a supply of water to the attacking infantry. D Coy completed a sap across No Man’s Land in the centre of the divisional sector of attack while a platoon of A Coy maintained a communication trench (V.C. Avenue) though the work lay direct in the enemy barrage line. For a fortnight following the engagement, the battalion was occupied in repair work on the front line and the communication trenches. D Coy were needed to carry out a drainage scheme which required careful grading throughout. The success of this scheme could be judged on the fact that during the winter of 1916 and 1917 the water didn’t rise above the duckboard level. While it is unclear which

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<sup>1</sup> Often referred to as Coodlee

<sup>2</sup> Francis Patrick, Blanche Carmen, twins John Michael and Thomas Patrick, Ignatius Leo, Mary Patricia, Peter Charles, Christopher Augustine, Hero Aloysius, Nora Agnes, Teresa, Daniel Michael, Patrick Peter.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Augustine also enlisted and returned home at the end of the war. Patrick Peter enlisted to serve in World War II.

<sup>4</sup> Boylan, A., B., and K., (2001) Boylan Memoirs, Kimba: self published

<sup>5</sup> Which formed part of the Australian 5<sup>th</sup> Division.

<sup>6</sup> Returned and Services League of South Australia (n.d.) ‘Hero Aloysius Boylan’ on RSL Virtual War Memorial, [online: <https://rslvirtualwarmemorial.org.au/explore/people/106925>] accessed 1 May 2017

<sup>7</sup> A term frequently used by the ANZACs to refer to the Germans.

<sup>8</sup> Stevens, F.H (1937) *The Story of the 5<sup>th</sup> Pioneer Battalion A.I.F.*, Adelaide: Callotype Company

<sup>9</sup> Repeated attacks with bombs or machine-gun fire from low-flying aircraft.

<sup>10</sup> Stevens, F.H (1937)

<sup>11</sup> Australian War Memorial (n.d.) *Battle of Fromelles*, [online: <https://www.awm.gov.au/military-event/E159/>] accessed 1 May 2017

<sup>12</sup> A company is often referred to as a coy.

company Hero belonged to during this time, it is unquestionable that each action required immense courage and dedicated hard work, all in the face of the immense loss of their comrades. Two days after the battle, Hero was admitted to hospital with the German measles. He was discharged on the 24<sup>th</sup> of July and re-joined his battalion.<sup>13</sup>

The battalion constructed what was known as “Bois Grenier” Line<sup>14</sup> which occupied the rest of the battalion’s stay in the area near Fromelles. For the last week (approximately), this line of defence was garrisoned by Hero and his battalion. Near the end of September C Coy were ordered to Armentières, approximately eleven or twelve kilometres from where the battalion worked as a detached unit. They were required to run a large timber mill, operating a plant for making concrete slabs, the control of trench tramways and general cleaning work. All these services were well organised and efficiently performed. The abilities of Hero and his battalion to adapt to any class of work were well displayed.

On October 14<sup>th</sup> the battalion moved to Neuf Berquin and a few days later entrained at Bailleul to proceed southwards to take part in the great battle of the Somme. When leaving the north, hostile conditions were experienced from the beginning. The train ride was exceptionally slow and overcrowded. When the detraining station at Pont Remy (near Abbeville) was reached, it was pitch black and raining. The station yard was ankle-deep in mud and the unloading arrangements were extremely crude. It was learnt that their billets were 8 miles off. The battalion were exhausted but a day’s rest helped to correct this. Hero and his fellow soldiers were then taken by a French motor convoy from Amiens to Dernancourt, and the following day marched to their first camp on the Somme near Montauban. One can only imagine a soldier’s feelings when being told “make yourself comfortable” and shown a hillside of mud with a few dugouts.

While at Montauban the battalion were ordered to maintain two long communication trenches known as Turk Lane and Fish Alley.<sup>15 16</sup> Both trenches were beginning to take shape when an almost continuous rain set in. Two or three days of rain made the sides of the trenches unsupported and the sides fell in, making the trenches impassable for Hero and his fellow soldiers. Tracks were then made along the top beside the trenches but these ultimately proved to be a failure. Experiments were made to use sledges over the mud and some success was made for the carriage of wounded soldiers. No sledge was successful with loads due to the varying consistency of the mud. Troubles were not only confined to their work as the camp Hero was living in become waterlogged. This, along with incessant marching over the heavy country, and the continuous, heavy shelling were marked features of the Somme fighting.<sup>17</sup>

While the 5<sup>th</sup> Pioneers were largely used to help dig trenches and to build and man infrastructure, but they were occasionally used as infantry during the toughest days in the Somme. Struck by gunfire in the late days of the battle of the Somme, Hero Aloysius Boylan died of wounds on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November 1916. His cousin, Hero Clarence North, died on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 1916, after

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<sup>13</sup> National Archives of Australia (n.d.) ‘NAA: B2455, Boylan H A’ [online: [www.recordsearch.naa.gov.au](http://www.recordsearch.naa.gov.au)] accessed 1 May 2017

<sup>14</sup> The Bois Grenier Line is a subsidiary line of defence about a mile behind the main front line

<sup>15</sup> Turk Lane and Fish Alley was started by the New Zealand Pioneer Battalion. Both trenches became part of a two metre artery that gave men moving to and from the Front Line a degree of cover.

<sup>16</sup> Stevens, F.H (1937)

<sup>17</sup> Stevens, F. H. (1937)

sustaining gunshot wounds to the chest. Both are buried in the Heilly Station Cemetery. They served in the same Pioneer Battalion and died from the same engagement. Nicknamed 'The Butcher Shop', Heilly Casualty Clearing Station, once located across from Heilly Station Cemetery, was the first clearing station with the right to perform urgent surgery so close to the front line.<sup>18</sup> Amputations were common at the Heilly CCS, with Hero Boylan requiring his left leg to be amputated, but died of wounds to his abdomen before surgery.<sup>19</sup>

The ANZACs were the Australian and New Zealand servicemen and women who participated in the war effort to defend our national values and community. The ANZAC Spirit stood, and still stands, for reckless valour in a good cause, for enterprise, ingenuity, fidelity, comradeship, courage, and endurance that would never know defeat.<sup>20</sup> In over 50,000 cases, including that of Hero Boylan, the ANZAC spirit was the willingness to sacrifice a life for their country, their pride, their mates and their family.<sup>21</sup> Hero Aloysius Boylan showed these traits throughout his time on the Western Front. His first major engagement came just a fortnight after disembarking, in the Battle of Fromelles, where Australia faced immense losses. He showed determination and dedication when building miles of railway or digging trenches, despite the danger to his life and the possibility of flooding or bombing. Hero's service required him to be creative and experiment quickly with ideas to solve problems, such as those as Fish Alley and Turk Lane. He fought alongside family and strangers that he soon had to entrust with his life: an incredible bond of mateship. Hero Aloysius Boylan may not have returned home to his family, but he showed the true spirit of an ANZAC and for this he is remembered by his family and community over 100 years later.

Word Count: 1497

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<sup>18</sup> Lockwood, A. (1940), 'Surgery In The Forward Areas' in *British Medical Journal*, March edition, p. 358

<sup>19</sup> National Archives of Australia (n.d.)

<sup>20</sup> Australian War Memorial (2016) *Anzac Spirit*, [online: <https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/anzac/spirit/>] accessed 1 May 2017

<sup>21</sup> Australian War Memorial (2016) *Anzac Spirit*, [online: <https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/anzac/spirit/>] accessed 1 May 2017

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# Photographs



1916	W. J. ...	...	...
1916	P. ...	...	...
1916	H. ...	...	...
1916	A. ...	...	...
1916	P. ...	...	...
1916	J. ...	...	...
1916	T. ...	...	...
1916	C. ...	...	...



Hero Boylan  
Heilly Station Cemetery  
30<sup>th</sup> December, 2016  
Photographed by Mrs Cendall Cowan





Private Hero Boylan in the trenches, Somme 1916