

Temporary Corporal Herbert Milne

Rod Martin

At the age of thirty-one, Herbert Milne had had an interesting life. He had played Australian Rules Football with the Fitzroy and South Melbourne clubs in the Victorian Football League for a number of years. At 181 centimetres tall and weighing seventy-eight kilos, he would have been formidable on the field as a follower (ruckman). He had fair hair and blue eyes, and probably cut a quite dashing figure.

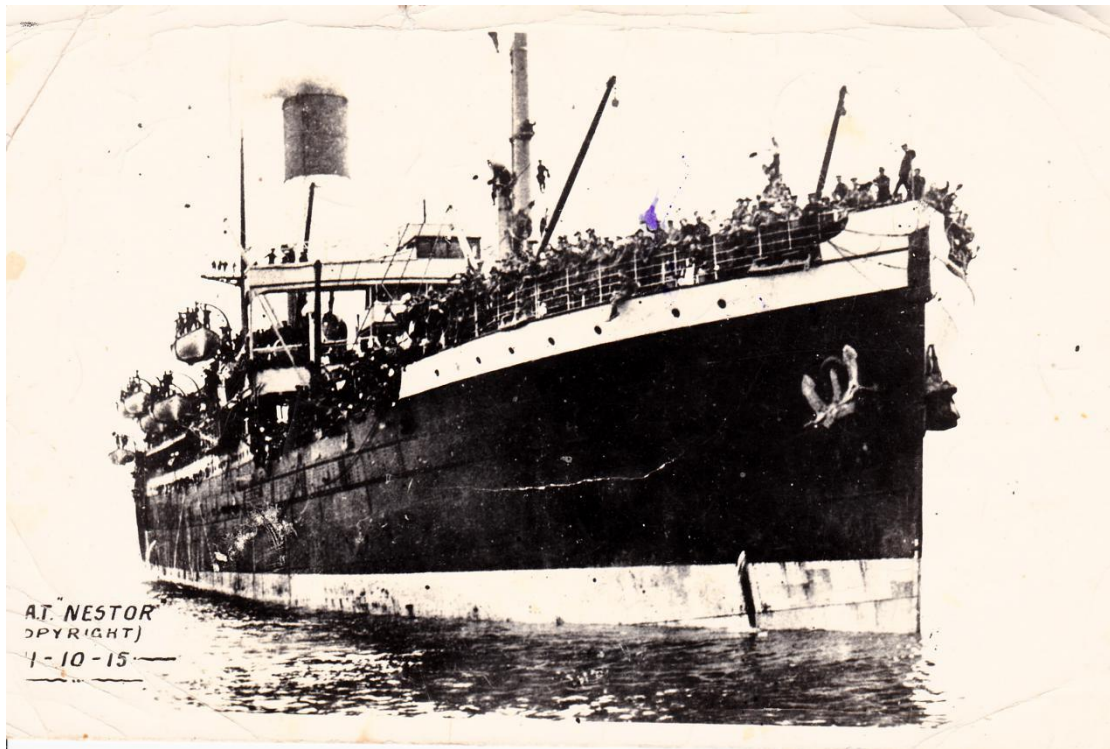
Because of his age at the time the war broke out in 1914, Herbert may well have felt that the predicted short and sharp conflict was the territory of the young and energetic. However, by 19 July 1915, when he joined up, the bad news had come though from Gallipoli, and a substantial recruitment campaign was in full swing. The fact that July 1915 saw the greatest number of recruitments (36 575) of any month during the war may also have had an effect upon Herbert. Others were doing it, so why shouldn't he?



(shireatwar.com)

Perhaps because of his age, or perhaps because he requested it, Herbert was assigned to 1 Australian General Hospital, probably as a medical orderly. There is no indication of previous paramedical experience on his attestation form. He was a clerk by trade. Herbert sailed for Egypt, probably on A71 HMAT *Nestor*, on 11 October 1915. By the time the ship arrived in Egypt, the evacuation from Gallipoli would have been complete or close to it, so he and his comrades were sent to the

recently established Australian base at Tel el Kebir, where they were assigned to 8 and then 14 Field Ambulance (FA) on 18 March 1916.



(Jennifer Worledge)

Between March and 19 June, when the unit accompanied 2 Anzac Corps to France, the men were involved in intensive training, including the use of ambulances and camels for transport and running sick bays for afflicted soldiers. The main complaints were reported as being diarrhoea, Pyrexia (fever) of unknown origin and a few cases of measles. Being attached to infantry units, 14 FA also participated in some of the extended route marches ordered by the new commander of 2 Anzac Corps, Lieutenant-General Godley. Conducted in searing heat and desert conditions, the marches, to as far as the Suez Canal in some cases, resulted in sizeable numbers of men suffering from heat exhaustion and heat stroke, and needing medical assistance. The men of all associated FA units would have been very busy with patients as well as their own training regimens.

The beginning of June found the unit based at Ferry Post, located on the Suez Canal. On the seventeenth, 14 FA, accompanying 14 Brigade, left for Alexandria, arriving on the morning of 19 June. The men boarded a number of transports and finally sailed for Marseilles on 22 June. The force arrived in Marseilles on the twenty-sixth and entrained for northern France the next day. On the last day of the month, the men arrived at Thiennes, near Hazebrouck, and went into billets there. Because they were now in a battle zone, the men quickly formed a dressing station in the town square.

14 FA then spent several days receiving intensive instruction on the treatment of soldiers injured in gas attacks, as well as learning how to protect themselves by using the rather rudimentary tube gas helmets then available.



PH-type gas helmets in common use on 1916.

(Imperial War Museum Q3995)

On 17 July 1916, 14 FA moved to Bac St. Maur, near Sailly-sur-la-Lys, not far from the villages of Fleurbaix and the German-held Fromelles. The British command, under General Richard Haking, had decided to conduct a feint at Fromelles in order to prevent the Germans from diverting some of the troops there to the main battleground of the Somme, further south. The idea was that the raw Australian troops of 5 Division (of which 14 Brigade was part) would attack across four hundred yards of waterlogged No Man's Land and seize a German bastion named the Sugar Loaf. Australian commanders such as 'Pompey' Elliott, in charge of 15 Brigade, saw the dangers involved, especially as the British themselves had concluded that no advance of more than 200 yards could hope to be successful - particularly against a strongpoint bristling with machine guns. However, Haking insisted on the attack going ahead. 14 FA, at Bac St. Maur, prepared to receive the inevitable casualties.

The attack took place on the evening of 19 June and, just as Pompey and others predicted, it was a slaughter. The bulk of the casualties were from Pompey's own 15 Brigade. Those wounded who could staggered back to their own lines during the night and the early morning. Pompey was there to see them come in, tears streaming down his face. At Bac on the morning of the twentieth,, the FA commander recorded that casualties began coming in at a '*great rate*', and many were still waiting to be picked up from the front trenches and dugouts. As a result, he received permission to '*throw in all reserves*' and sent ninety-two men to the front with the instructions to push forward to the front trenches and help to clear them of wounded. He received a report later that this was done, but that there were still wounded in No Man's Land. Eventually, some of them were able to crawl back to their lines. Others, however, remained out there, dying slowly of their wounds and/or thirst, their mournful cries puncturing the air and the souls of those who were unable to reach them as the Germans continued their bombardment and machine-gunning of the area.

Here we must pause to recognise the supreme efforts of the ambulance men, Herbert probably among them, who risked their own lives to venture into the front trenches and No Man's Land to bring wounded soldiers to safety.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P10330.006

Men of 12 FA stretchering a wounded soldier, Pozières 1917. Both bearers were awarded Military Medals for their bravery in action during the war. (AWM P10330.006)

Theirs was a very dangerous occupation, as the awarding of medals proves. Private R. English of 14 FA was awarded a military medal for his efforts during operations on the eighteenth and nineteenth of July.

By 21 July, the number of cases arriving at the dressing station had slowed considerably. However, the wounds of many of the ones that did arrive were already showing signs of putrefaction and gas gangrene. The stretcher bearers, no doubt exhausted as a result of their efforts over the previous two days, were rested as much as possible.

The slaughter at Fromelles represented the greatest loss of men in a single day-long battle in Australian military history. 5 533 soldiers were killed or wounded that night (the extent of the loss was covered up by military command because it was so great) and 5 Division was devastated and decimated, so much so that it had to be withdrawn from combat for the rest of the year.

After the battle, 14 FA was sent to Sailly Laundry where it effectively went into reserve for the remainder of July and then into September. In some cases, such as occurred on 30 September, some bearers were sent to a nearby advanced dressing station. On that occasion, ten wounded men were brought in from battle, one dying in a motor ambulance car *en route*.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E05246

A motor ambulance car in use in France 1918

(AWM E05246)

However, horse-drawn ambulances were also used up until the end of the war. The photograph below show the 14 FA horse lines near Bonnay, France, in 1918.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E03903

(AWM E03903)

The early part of October 1916 found the unit still at Saily Laundry and still in reserve. Around the tenth of the month the commanding officer received orders to conduct a ballot as part of the plebiscite on conscription, at that time causing very heated differences of opinion in Australia. Volunteer numbers were down and had been since the end of July 1915, and the Hughes Labor government was keen to forcibly conscript young men to make up for the increasingly obvious gaps in the ranks. The Australian voters - including those in the armed forces - decided otherwise,

however. Reflecting the opinions of the majority of the soldiers, Herbert wrote to his father that

I see by the papers they are going to ask the soldiers in the trenches whether they want Conscription. Let me tell you that if they do, the voting from the men will be 95 in every 100 against it. Let Hughes, Watt, and all the other gang come over first, and then advise. In short, Australians don't want it brought in.

In January 1917, after the result of the plebiscite had been announced, Herbert added:

We heard that conscription had been knocked out in Australia. The men over here were all pleased by the result.

The main reasons given for the soldiers' attitude were, first, that they did not want to see men forced to participate in what was a very bloody conflict and, secondly, that they believed that conscripts would not fight as bravely as would volunteers. The performance of some of the first British conscripts at the Battle of the Somme may well have convinced the Australians that their opinions were correct.

Another ballot, conducted the following year, had a closer but still negative result.

On 13 October, 14 FA was on the move, eventually arriving at Mametz, east of the town of Albert, on the twenty-second. The men were now in the battle zone again and the bearers were having a hard time of it due to the poor state of the roads after heavy rains and the fact that they were peppered with shell holes, which made the going all that much more difficult. The commanding officer went to inspect the state of the men on 28 October and found the condition of them

. . . satisfactory . . . Several have broken down under strain & stress of work & weather. Number of 'sick' admitted from both Australian and British units on the increase apparently owing to wet weather and strain of carrying out work in boggy state of ground.

Because of these conditions and the early onset of what was to be described as the worst European winter for forty years, the Battle of the Somme, the greatest battle of the war, was slowly grinding to a halt without any effective progress being made.



Somme mud

(AWM P05380.002)

On 1 November, the commander noted that the conditions were worsening, so much so that the unit was having difficulty in evacuating the wounded from the front owing to the lack of cars. Many could not navigate their way through the mud. The commander also recorded a increase in the numbers of sick amongst his own ranks due to influenza, diarrhoea and Trench Foot, an affliction brought about by standing in cold mud for considerable lengths of time (see the photo above!), leading to loss of blood flow and numbness. If not treated quickly, it could result in gangrene and the resultant loss of digits, limbs and even life.

On 5 November, the unit moved out and headed to Buire, a town on the Ancre river, a tributary of the Somme. Its job at that time was to take the sick men of 14 Brigade, located nearby in Ribemont, to hospital. However, the commander reported that he was faced with difficulties of transport owing to the evacuation of horses exhausted through heavy work at the previous location. At that time, he was ten horses short of establishment.

On the eighth of the month the unit moved into billets at Rainneville, north of the strategic rail junction city of Amiens. After moving around for several days, 14 FA was finally sent to an advanced dressing station not far from the town of Albert. On 23 November, while at that location, Herbert became ill and was sent to a field hospital, believed to be suffering from bronchitis. He was then sent to a casualty clearing station, and from there to a hospital, where he remained until 7 January 1917. While he was there, he was probably happy to be out of the cold during that particularly bitter winter. However, all good things come to an end, and he was back with his unit by the ninth of the month. By that date, 14 FA was at Vignacourt, north-east of Amiens. After a few moves, conducted in freezing weather, the unit found itself at the scabies hospital in Buire at the end of the month. Scabies are small mites that burrow under the skin. They are highly contagious, especially in crowded and unsanitary conditions, and thrive where there is close human contact. The

commander reported that, on 31 January, there were 343 patients in the hospital, nearly all suffering from scabies, with or without complications. Fortunately, because of the bad weather, little or no action was taking place along the front lines. Early the next month, the Germans actually staged a strategic retreat to their Siegfried (Hindenburg) defensive line, designed to straighten out their front line and thus save increasingly scarce manpower that, up until that time, was being wasted on the defence of a number of salients (bulges). The Allies moved forward cautiously to take control of the territory thus left vacant.

The Germans were not going to give up territory without a fight, however. Accordingly, as the Allies moved forward, they were subjected to bombardments, snipers, aerial attack, shrapnel and booby traps, and many were wounded or killed. 14 FA followed 1, 2 and 5 Divisions as they advanced, setting up a collecting station at Becordel. At this time in March 1917, it would appear that German airmen were flying over the allied lines and dropping objects (as well as bombs) from their aircraft. A general order was issued on the seventh of the month, warning troops to hand anything non-explosive dropped from an enemy aircraft to the intelligence corps because there had apparently been reports of poisoned sweets being dropped in some areas. If this was the case, then the Germans were obviously getting desperate at this stage of the war. The danger of such sweets to children living near the war zone was obvious and represented a new low in the Great War.



An Advanced dressing station near Ypres, Belgium, September 1917 (AWM E00715)



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E03137

Stretcher bearers of 6 FA carrying wounded from an advanced dressing station to a waiting motor ambulance for conveyance to a casualty clearing station. The Somme, September 1918. (AWM E03137)

On 7 April 1917, 14 FA left the collecting station and moved to a corps scabies station at Aveluy, near Albert. At the same time, as happened throughout the war, sections of men from the unit were sent to nearby advanced posts and clearing stations to assist the staffs there. One group was sent to Millencourt soon after arriving at Aveluy. On 15 April, the major in charge of the group at that location asked the unit commander to visit and advise him regarding an incident in which a local woman approached him to claim that her house had been broken into and she had been robbed of wine and 400 francs in cash. An investigation found that three of the group, a lance-sergeant and two privates, were guilty of the crime and they were placed under arrest. After investigating the incident, the commander laid charges against the men and, presumably, called for a court-martial. Not all of the ambulance men were completely honourable, it would seem!

On 29 April, the ballot for the second plebiscite on conscription was conducted, all enlisted men, officers and patients being given the opportunity to cast their votes. As noted above, the Australia-wide majority vote was again in the negative, and eventually led to prime minister 'Billy' Hughes being expelled from the Labor Party for continuing to push for conscription and forming a coalition with the conservative Commonwealth Liberal Party to create the Nationalist Party and stay in government. The new party was then voted back into government in May 1917.

That same month, 14 FA was still at Aveluy and, on the fourth, Herbert was granted leave in England until the eighteenth. While he was away, a report came in from another location, saying that two men from 14 FA who had been assigned there on a temporary basis had been killed and eight others wounded. The attrition rate continued as the month wore on, including when the unit transferred to an unnamed location on the eleventh. By the eighteenth, when Herbert returned, 14FA was getting ready to move to 3 FA clearing station and gas centre for drift gas cases at

Avesnes-les-Bapaume. Some of the sections then moved on to locations at Pozières and the scabies hospital at Aveluy. We have no way of knowing which location Herbert was sent to. If it was the gas centre, He would have experienced the following, as described by 14 FA's commander:

[It] consists of marquees etc with curtains rolled up to ensure fresh air, the patients lie on stretchers or trestles, and 3 nitrous oxide inhalers are attached by tubing to Oxygen Cylinders, ready for emergencies. About 30 cases were taken over, all mild cases or doubtful. They are put on milk diet for 1st 2 days and then on liberal diet. They are kept rigidly to bed for 1st 6 days then if well enough are allowed to walk to latrine and given gentle exercises A pulse taken to check cardiac condition. When well enough to send to C.C.S. as sitting cases, they are taken by Motor Amb to No 47 C.C.S. (Varennnes) via 2nd D.R.S. [distribution receiving station] (Becordel).



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ART02325

Will Dyson: *Slightly gassed cases at the 3rd Field Ambulance, Avesnes Bapaume, 1917*
(AWM ART 02325. Copyright © Australian War Memorial)

If Herbert went to the receiving station at Pozières, he would have seen sitting up sick and wounded, who were taken there by motor lorries from a detraining station at Bapaume. After resting and feeding they were then entrained at the nearby railhead and sent to Becordel.

2 June saw 14 FA back at the scabies hospital in Aveluy. The average number of patients there at that time was between 150 and 220, many of them British as the station had been absorbed into 4 British Corps. In the middle of the month, the unit moved to a divisional rest station at Warloy and began a training regime. At the same

time, many of the men went on leave to Amiens and no doubt enjoyed the delights of that town. At the end of the month the number of patients at the station was between 100 and 2130, most of them recovering from Trench Foot, pyrexia and boils. Most of them were then sent off to a casualty clearing station, to be returned to their units.

In early July, the men at the station were “treated” to a lecture from the commanding officer on the subject of the nature and prevention of venereal disease, followed by a “longer” talk from an archdeacon on the moral aspect. VD was a continuing problem amongst Australian forces (and no doubt those from other nations as well) right from the start. Some men suffering from the diseases were sent home from Egypt before even getting to Gallipoli. It was important to try to prevent their spread as much as possible because they could have a disastrous impact on the number of troops available for battle at any given time. While the commander’s emphasis on prevention and hygiene may have hit home with some of the men, for those in a war zone, whose lives could well end in a flash, just how effective a talk on morals would be is open to question. The commander’s conclusion that the outstanding reason for the men’s loose morals and lack of prevention was drunkenness cannot be faulted. However, for the same reasons given above, how could such behaviour be stopped? As the commander also noted, prophylactics were distributed to all men going on leave and, upon returning, they had to hand in their passes to the orderly at the prophylactics tent, *“in order to ensure that all may realize their opportunity of prevention”*. However, he also noted, however, that *“a man’s word is taken that any treatment there is not necessary.”* Did he have his doubts about some of these assurances?

At the beginning of July 1917 14 FA moved to a rest area at Ebblinghem, near St. Omer in northern France. Once there, the men were required to undertake route marches, company drills and lectures on relevant topics. They stayed there into September, being given a lecture on the first of the month on the deadly new mustard gas that the Germans had first used in the Third Battle of Ypres (occurring at that time). Because of the location of its first use, the gas was named “Yperite”. It burned the skin on contact, could boil the eyes, and seared the lungs if breathed in.



Australian soldiers gassed (probably with Yperite, judging by the bandages on their eyes) near Villers-Bretonneux, France, May 1918.

(AWM E04851)

On 17 September, 14 FA began moving north, following 14 Infantry Brigade, headed for the battlefield at Ypres. The men arrived at the ramparts of the town at 11.00 pm on the twenty-second and took over an advanced dressing station. This meant that it was close to the front lines. The Battle of Menin Road, close to Ypres, had been fought just two days before. It was a success for the Australians but came at a considerable cost: 5 000 casualties were suffered by 1 and 2 Divisions. All advanced dressing stations in the area around Ypres would have been extremely busy, while the Germans inundated the area with shells and bombs as they attempted to regain the territory they had lost. One victim of this rearguard action was Herbert himself. On 23 September, his active war ended when he was wounded by a machine gun bullet in his left thigh, the wound being described as "severe". The Germans had no respect for authority either. Only two days later, the commander of 14 FA, Lieutenant-Colonel Thompson, was also wounded and evacuated from the battlefield.

Herbert was evacuated to a hospital and then, on 17 October, transferred to England and No.1 Auxiliary Hospital at Harefield, near High Wycombe, north-west of London.



Ward at No. 1 Auxiliary Hospital, Harefield, 1918

(AWM H03583)

It would appear that Herbert was in the hospital until he was transferred to the training depot at Hurdcott on Salisbury Plain on 22 November. Only eight days later, however, he was in hospital again, but this time only for an ingrown toenail. He was back at Hurdcott by 19 December and we must presume that he remained there until at least mid-1919, when he was repatriated to Australia. During that time, the war ended in November 1918, he was promoted to temporary corporal on Boxing Day, and then his rank reverted to private on 15 May 1919.

Herbert was probably detained at Hurdcott in order to look after other injured soldiers until they were repatriated. His own repatriation began at Devonport on the south coast on 11 May 1919 and he sailed back to Australia on the hospital ship *A30 HMAT Borda*, acting as a member of the nursing staff.



A distant view of the Australian camp at Hurdcott, December 1917

(AWM C01280)

Back in Australia, Herbert was discharged from the army on 19 August. What happened to him after that we do not know, except to say that he died on board a ship near Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), in 1931 at the age of forty-six and was buried at sea. It was reported that his illness was blamed on the war.

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