

Private Eardley Austin Clark
6986
10th Battalion D Company

Eardley Clark joined the AIF in Adelaide on 26 Oct 1916 and sailed on the Transport Berrima just before Christmas 1916. Two months later he disembarked in Devonport UK and commenced training in England. He was hospitalised in March 1917 with Pyrexia of Unknown Origin (PUO), commonly called Trench Fever. Released on 22 March 1917, he continued his training until 3 May when he posted overseas to France and joined 10th Battalion AIF on 18 May 2017 in Bapaume, France.

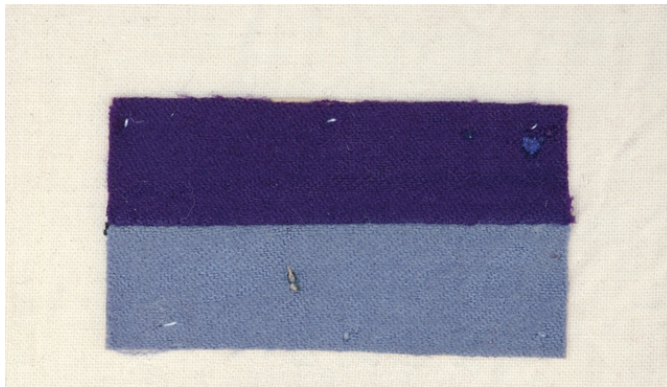


Figure 1- 10th Battalion AIF Patch

As the Battalion had just come out of the line at Bullecourt with a loss of and 7 officers 174 other ranks, training and reorganising was the order of the day. Eardley Austin Clark was assigned to D Company and continued training and learning the platoon and company structure. If it hadn't dawned on Eardley what the risks of his occupation were yet, it is hard to believe he wasn't aware by the time his battalion moved into the line again in September 1917 at Polygon Wood. Eardley was going to war!

AUD 1 KALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

RELAWMU/291. US 2

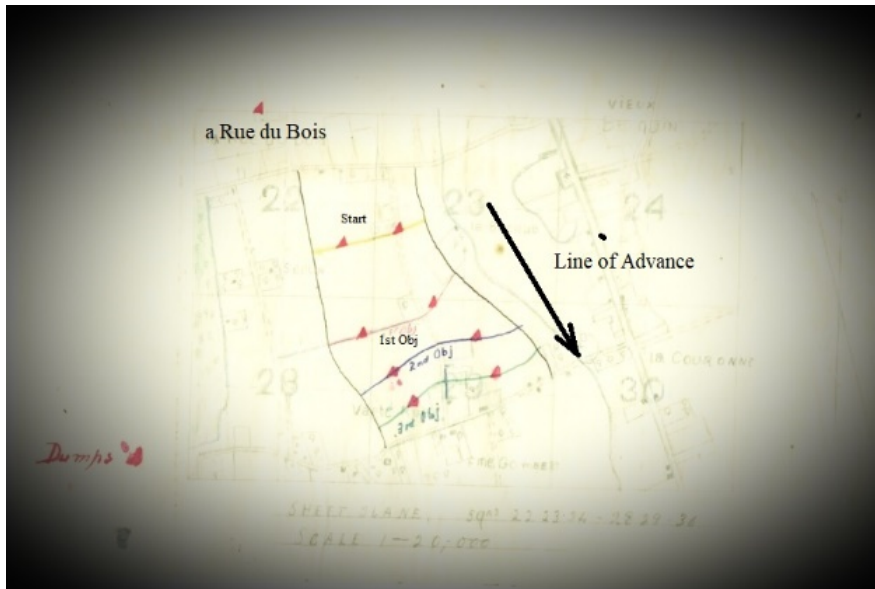


Figure 2 Objectives - 10th Batt to take third Objective

On the night of the 19/20th September 1917 the Battalion moved passed the Hooge Crater and a chateau dubbed the "Half Way House" into the line ready for an attack at 3am. 101 years

later Elizabeth spent two nights in the Kasteelhof't Hooghe which a hotel that was built on that route.

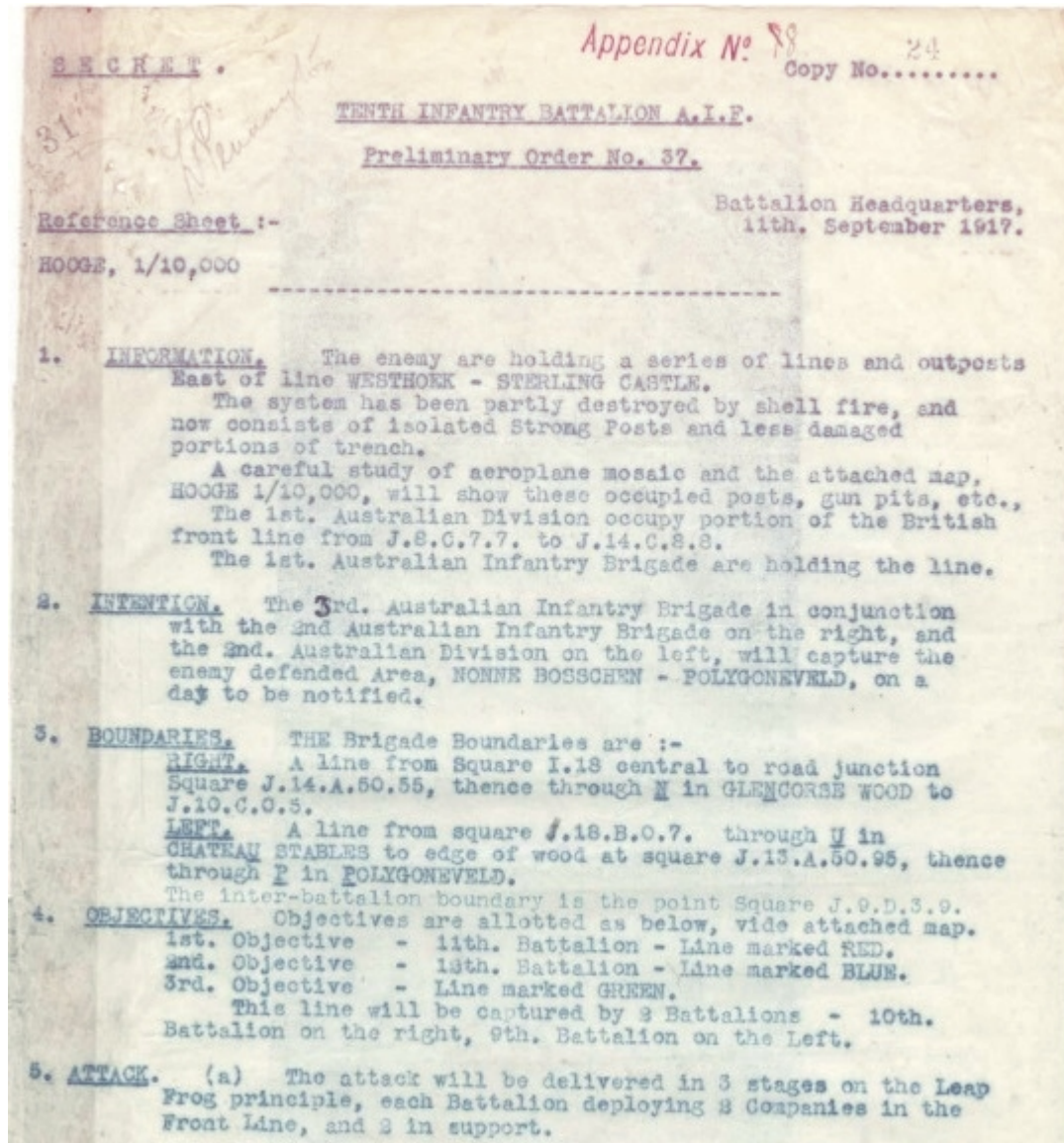


Figure 3 - Orders

A German barrage hit the men and several were killed. The Captains and the NCO quickly reorganised the men and at 5:40am they moved forward.

Initially held up by a pillbox, the battalion halted until a Lieutenant Leaver led an attack on the pill box which led to the neutralising of the weapons but the Lieutenant was killed in the attack.

The battalion continued to attack and eventually took the third objective (figure 2) and was also able to fill the line that had been assigned to 12th Battalion as that Battalion had themselves occupied the wrong part of the new line.

The Germans counterattacked but the strategy of British forces for not advancing beyond the range of their own guns allowed the Australian forces to repel the counterattack and it was considered to be a dark day for the German army.

What Eardley did in this attack is not known as the reorganisation meant that we cannot identify where in the battle he was likely to be. However, he was in the attack because he was medically fit, had just arrived and there is no record of him being unfit.

The battalion was relieved and moved out of the line on 29th September and were moved by bus to the rear area for rest.

It was a short rest because the 10th Battalion moved into the line on 5 Oct 1917 opposite Celtic Wood, Belgium. The relief operation was conducted under German shell fire and there were a number of casualties including many in C Company which was caught in the open and lost most of 12 Platoon. D Company sheltered in the old front line trench until the shell fire lessened.

Shortly after Eardley arrived in the line, he was selected to reinforce C Company for a raid on the German position at Celtic Wood on the night of 8 Oct 1917. However, he was wounded in the face by a shell fragment on Broodseinde Ridge the afternoon before the attack went in. The attacking party consisted of 5 officers and 80 other ranks and actually launched at 5:20am on the 9 Oct 1917 but the records indicate that the casualties were recorded on 8 Oct 1917. This administration error helped to develop the so called mystery of Celtic Wood.

While that attack developed Eardley was transported to the 1st Australian Casualty Clearing Station, treated then moved to the 17th Casualty Clearing Station then on to the 18th General Hospital. He remained in hospital until 14 October then transferred to the 6th Convalescent Hospital at Etaples near the north coast of France.

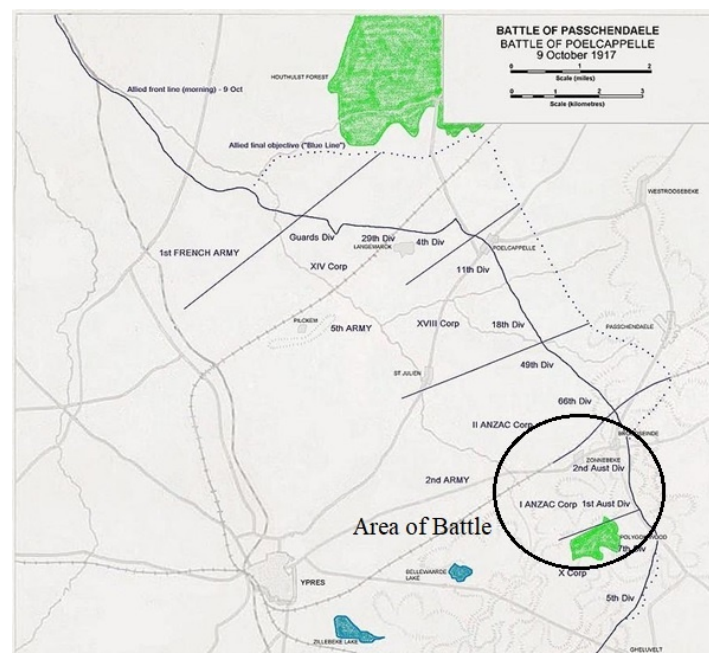


Figure 4 - Battle Ground including Celtic Wood

The plan was for the 10th to charge the woods, blow up German dugouts and retire on a flare signal. On the northern flank of the 10th Battalion, the 2nd Australian Division would mount a large attack to protect the flank of the main British advance on its northern flank. To mislead Germans that the attack was part of the main advance, instead of the normal night attack, the troops attacked at dawn while the normal "box barrage" used to protect infantry raids was replaced with a creeping barrage used for attacks. At 5:20 a.m. on 9 October, the barrage began and 85 men of the 10th Battalion under the command of 22-year-old Lieutenant Frank Scott, advanced.

Rather than the "rolling curtain of death" expected to shield the attack, the barrage was light and scattered when the 10th Battalion advanced across the 180 metres (200 yd) separating Celtic Wood from the Australian trenches. The terrain to be crossed consisted of tree stumps, bomb craters metres wide and due to heavy rain over the preceding days, mud that in some places was knee-deep. Compounding this, the 10th Battalion had raided Celtic Wood twice the previous week, leading the Germans to reinforce the position and install more machine-guns. Lieutenant Scott ordered a frontal attack on the German trench, while he led a group around the flank to attack from behind. Despite being outnumbered, Scott was successful and the German troops began a retreat as soon as they were fired on from the rear. German reinforcements quickly arrived and engaged the Australians in hand-to-hand combat, pushing them back while at the same time German artillery opened fire, barraging no man's land, making a retreat impossible. Within a short time all the officers were dead or wounded. Sergeant William Cole tried to fire the flare signalling the withdrawal but was killed as he was firing it and the survivors were left to find their own way back. The German artillery barrage continued, preventing the Australians from retreating. Caught in the barrages, the 37 missing soldiers were likely killed by the shelling and along with the bodies of those previously killed in the attack, left no recognisable remains to be recovered.

In early January 1918 Eardley was posted to 177th Tunnelling Company probably because of his mining experience in South Australia. In this time the company was repositioning from Flanders to the Somme Valley in France. Eardley was most likely employed in the transportation of the company. In late January 1918 Eardley returned to the Battalion just soon enough for leave in UK. Eardley was on leave from 23 Feb to 16 Mar 1918 and was then loaned to 184th Tunnelling Company.

The 184th Tunnelling Company became involved in the resistance of the German advance of March 1918 through the Somme and the Ypres Salient. The 184th Tunnelling Company was employed as an infantry company and in the destruction of fortifications. At one point Eardley must have watched as the German Army stormed along the Armentières Road towards Dunkirk overrunning the towns of Merris and Merville. The irony of this was that the town of Merris was to be pivotal in Eardley's life.

When the German advance stalled, Eardley was sent back to the 10th Battalion on 5 April 1918 just in time for the ANZAC battalions to be put into the defence of Amiens and the counterattack. The Battalion moved south as a reserve on 6 April 1918 and at 9am 13 April boarded trains and headed north. On 23rd April the Battalion attacked the village of Meteren



Figure 5- Australian Soldiers resting after Celtic Wood Raid

with A and B Companies attacking but encountered heavy fire from machine guns sited at the farm. C and D Company advanced but also were unable to dislodge the enemy. C Company then supported A Company while D Company were instrumental in supporting B Company as they withdrew.

The battalion was relieved on 28th April and proceeded to Strazeele as the Divisional reserve.

On 27 May D Company, supported by A & C Company, conducted a fighting patrol with the intention of capturing and holding German strongpoints at Mout de Merris. The attack started badly with several of D Company wounded or killed when the open barrage fell short. However, once the barrage lifted, the company advanced and achieved its objectives. The Germans fought hand to hand but under the relentless pressure of D Company, the enemy broke and retreated.

A further attack including Eardley's company, was conducted 2/3rd June 1918 and over 200 prisoners were passed back through the HQ Company and the objectives of straightening the line were achieved. The success was in no small degree due to the prepositioning supply dumps in front of the Australian lines the night before and this work was done by D Company. Fighting continued off and on until 4th June and then the Battalion was relieved for a much needed rest and refit.

The 10th Battalion went back into the line 25/26th June taking over from the 11th Battalion and on 28th June the Battalion carried out what was to be called a Simulated Attack on Merris. The CO declared this as a raid with the possibility of holding ground captured. C & D



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E02493

Figure 6 - Merris June 1918

Companies attacked on the flanks and were able to capture six machine guns and the crews. The following morning A Company joined in with B Company supporting and ultimately 100 Germans were killed, 35 captured and 450m of trench were occupied. Eardley once more had been in the thick of it. The next day the Battalion was congratulated by the Army and Corp Commanders as it was being recognised as one of the better Battalions.

On 4th July 1918 the Germans attacked two posts manned by the 10th Battalion and were repulsed with heavy casualties on the enemy. The attack was preceded with a shelling and gas attack on the whole front held by 10th and 12th Battalions but both Battalions stood to and withheld the assault.

The next night the 10th was relieved and commenced training for the planned capture of Merris. All companies trained and practiced in close combat drills and musketry. They returned to the line around Merris on 21st/22nd July 1918. The next evening both C and D Companies conducted an offensive patrol which successfully captured 4 prisoners, two machine guns and killed approximately 50-70 enemy soldiers. D Company, in particular reached its objective of the Merris – Outtersteene Road before drawing fire and meeting resistance from the Germans. The Company withdrew skilfully and casualties were light.

The order to capture Merris on 29th/30th July was received early on the morning of the 29th but preparations had been made well in advance. The plan was for A & B Companies to lead the assault with C Company holding the Right flank and D Company the Left Flank. Eardley was in 16 Platoon on the extreme left of the 10th's front (Strong point 10).

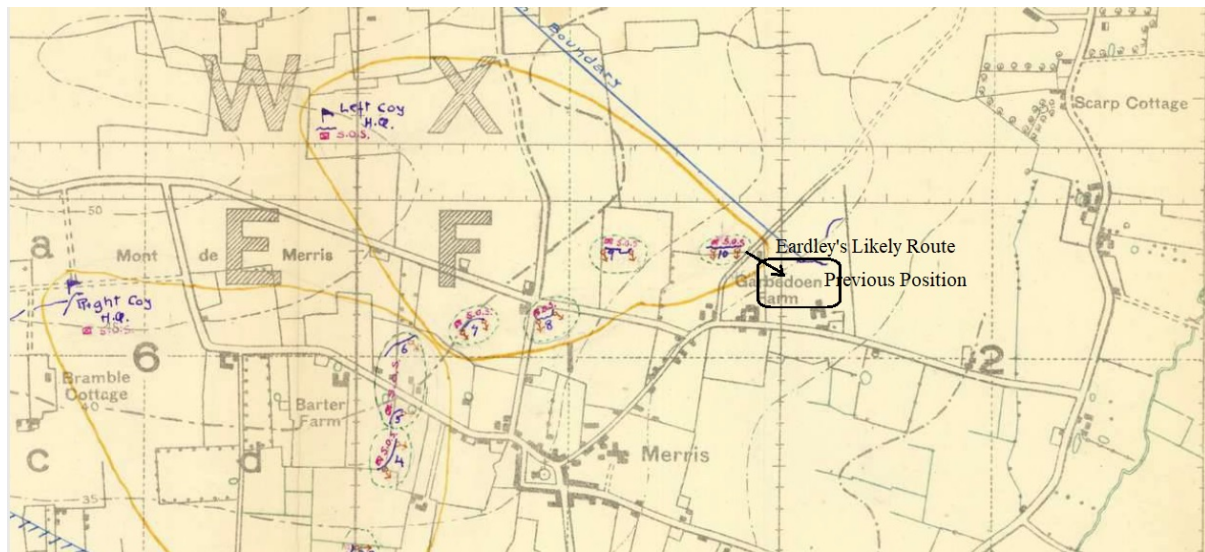


Figure 7- Disposition 29th July 1918

The Board of Enquiry convened 14 Jan 1919 established that the last time Eardley was seen alive was just prior to midnight 29th July 1918 when he was released to return to a previous position to retrieve his haversack which held all his possessions. This involved him moving from the strongpoint 10 to the Garbedoen Farm near the Merris - Outtersteene Road. Corporal Jones reported that he heard what he thought was a German bomb explode and possibly a man cry out. No effort was made to find Eardley as they moved off towards Merris shortly after.

After the war, his wife Hilda Clark received his pay book, some personal papers and cards from Germany. They were returned from Germany under the name Albert Kruger who was killed on the same day and is buried at the Outtersteene Communal Cemetery Extension, Bailleul which is a short distance from the battlefield. On closer examination by British authorities the artefacts were determined to be from Eardley. At first Hilda thought it might indicate he had been captured and had been a Prisoner of War. However, no evidence of Eardley being held by the Germans was found, so the most likely story is that as Eardley moved towards the old position where his haversack had been left, he was seen by a German patrol and killed. Procedure at the time would be to grab any papers being carried by a soldier to pass them to intelligence. How he was killed we can only surmise but the area had been shelled heavily and was more like a moonscape with craters all over caused by the shelling. It is possible that the bomb heard by Corporal Jones was tossed into a crater and Eardley killed there. Equally he could have been shot and fell into a crater.

The mopping up soldiers found no sign of him but any shelling in the area may well have buried his body deep in the ground or made any remains unrecognisable. Eardley died as so

many soldiers died in the Great War, alone and now lies in an unknown grave. If he was recovered in the post war years and laid to rest, he most likely is one of the many graves of unknown soldiers at the Outtersteene Communal Cemetery Extension about 2 km from where he most likely fell. Indeed the mix up with Albert Kruger may indicate they were found close to each other and he is interred at this cemetery.



Figure 8- Looking out over the Battleground



Figure 9- In Merris

The field is on the outskirts of Merris and is the location of the last time Eardley was seen alive.

On 29 July 2018 his granddaughter Elizabeth Colthorpe visited Merris, the field near the old farm and then went to the nearest Commonwealth War Grave Commission site at Outtersteene where 1400 Commonwealth soldiers lay at rest.

Elizabeth and Peter selected an Unknown Australian Soldier and placed this plaque (see Page 9) next to the grave. It is 25 Stones on the left as you walk up the path between the graves to the cenotaph.

They paid tribute to Eardley and his colleagues who defended the Western Front and eventually forced Germany to sue for peace.

It can never be known whether the remains below the plaque are Eardley, but it is symbolic that one grave “known only to god” in that area is possibly that of Eardley.

They held a private service thanking Eardley for his legacy and Peter saluted his plaque. RIP brave son of Australia. You and all soldiers of the Commonwealth have a special place in the hearts of the French and Belgium people everywhere.



The Memorial
Random Grave of an Unknown Australian Soldier
Outtersteene Community Cemetery
Military Extension