The Battle of Messines

The gallantry of the 45th Infantry Battalion of the Australian Imperial Force

Unrecovered War Casualties – Army
January 2018
The 45th Battalion

The 45th Australian Imperial Force (AIF) Battalion was established in Egypt on 2 March 1916 as part of the effort to double the AIF's size. Nearly half of its recruits had fought in Gallipoli, coming from the 13th Battalion, and the other half were fresh reinforcements from Australia. Arriving in France on 8 June 1916, destined for the Western Front, the battalion formed part of the 12th Brigade of the 4th Australian Division. After fighting in many major battles including Pozieres, Ypres and Bullecourt, the battalion was called upon as a reserve in the Battle of Messines that commenced on 7 June 1917.

The 45th Battalion and the Battle of Messines

The price of victory at Messines Ridge was very high for the 45th Australian Battalion. In four days of savage fighting during June 1917, the battalion was almost wiped out. Commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Sydney Herring, the 45th battalion was one of the 4 battalions of the 4th Division given the task of taking the final objective at Messines. This proved to be extremely costly for the battalion, with 568 casualties and over 170 killed – one of the worst experiences of any Australian unit in any war.

With the Ridge wrenched from German hands by the dawn assault of General Herbert Plumer’s Second British Army, a further advance was planned as three fresh divisions (the 4th Division among them) were to push on to capture the German support lines in the afternoon. It was a daunting prospect for the men of the 4th Division who, only some 6 weeks prior, had had their battalions torn apart in the First Battle of Bullecourt.

The Advance of the 4th Australian Division

In preparation for the attack on the German support lines, the attacking Divisions were to climb to the top of the Wytschaete-Messines Ridge and assemble at their start tapes. The Australians assembled in good time, but the British 33rd Brigade, who were to attack on the left flank of the 4th Division, were hopelessly late. Consequently, Plumer decided to delay the attack by two hours to give the Brigade time to reach their lines, setting a new zero time of 3:10 p.m. Having received news of the delay too late, the 4th Division had already begun their descent of over 1000 metres down an open slope in full view of the enemy artillery. This left the men of the Division to find shelter where they could and wait for two hours before advancing further. As they waited, shells started bursting among them, killing and wounding many.

As the whistles sounded at 3.10 p.m. to launch the assault, the Australians climbed to their feet to advance and almost immediately ran into a hail of small arms fire. The 45th Battalion, already depleted by the shelling they endured while waiting for the attack to begin, ran into a wall of fire as they moved down the slope. Similarly, the 49th Battalion, attacking immediately left of the 45th, had its line shattered and all four company commanders killed in the opening minutes, stopping its attack dead in its tracks. With the 49th’s failure on the left of the 45th, and with the men of the 45th separated from the rest of the battalion on the right, the left of the 45th found itself isolated, alone and pinned down well short of its objective,
facing impenetrable defences in front. The heavy machine-guns firing from the pillboxes had an effective range of almost 1800 metres and the field guns firing over open sights made close approach completely impossible. In the noisy pandemonium of the battle, the arc of machine-gun bullets travelled silently and unseen from the distance ahead and the only warning the men of the 45th received was the sight of their comrades falling around them. Against such a lethal screen, the only option for the Australians was to seek what cover they could in shell holes and the remains of German trenches.

With most of his brother officers lying dead or wounded on the battlefield, Captain Arthur Allen took charge of the 45th's right companies. He led an attack on a pillbox protected by thick belts of wire and pouring out an incessant fire on his men. They were able to successfully capture prisoners and two machine-guns, fighting their way into the final objective on the Green Line. Fate now dealt a cruel blow when their own artillery miscalculated their range and landed their shells directly across the Australian line. With their ammunition running low and now faced with certain death at the hands of their own artillery, the entire division was driven back almost to the top of the ridge, giving up the ground they had won at such a high price. Many were killed by the barrage and the lethal torrent of small arms fire as they retreated to find cover.

**Continuation of the Attack**

With the briefest of rests overnight, the survivors collected themselves in the New Zealand trenches on top of the ridge while the stretcher bearers scoured the ground ahead in the darkness, searching and calling for the wounded and dying. With his division suffering heavily, and still not in possession of his objective they were tasked to capture on the 7th of June, the commander of the 4th Division, General William Holmes decided to press on with his attacks. As dawn broke on the 8th, the 45th and 47th Battalions again moved forward, stealthily this time and against the scattered fire, to try to recapture the ground they were shelled out of the previous day. Remarkably, they managed to regain some of the lost ground on the morning of the 8th of June and began a long and costly effort to run the German defenders out of the trenches and pillboxes they still held. Casualties continued to mount from sniper fire and the searching artillery as orders came through to again assault the deadly pillboxes attacking the surviving Allies.

By the evening of 10 June, the 45th battalion may have appeared as a functioning unit on maps at brigade and divisional headquarters, but it numbered less than a company. Despite the fact that they were down to the last of their strength, and despite a series of costly and failed attempts over the previous days to capture enemy strongpoints, Lieutenant-Colonel Herring sent orders to one of his few surviving platoon commanders, Lieutenant Thomas McIntyre, then with his platoon down to 15 men, to again attempt to storm the southernmost blockhouse which barred the way. Plainly impossible though it was, Herring’s order was answered by McIntyre. Rising over the parapet, McIntyre and his party raced to within five metres of the pillbox before he and four others were cut down. With this last gallant but futile sacrifice, the 45th was utterly spent, the dead and dying lay everywhere across the fields of Messines.
Table 1: Names and birth places of 86 Australian soldiers from the 45th AIF Battalion reportedly buried in a mass grave in Messines, Belgium.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Birthplace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ARCHER, Sidney James</td>
<td>Twrining, Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAKER, Harold Edward</td>
<td>Killara, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BALLARD, Milton Hollroy</td>
<td>Wagga Wagga, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BARTLETT, Herbert John</td>
<td>Muswellbrook, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEWLEY, Albert Henry</td>
<td>Gunning, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLENKINSOP, John David</td>
<td>Askern, Doncaster, Yorkshire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLUMER, George Stanley</td>
<td>Parry, Tamworth, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOULTEN, William George</td>
<td>Paddington, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAMERON, Ian Campbell</td>
<td>Ivanhoe, Wiccania, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAMPBELL, Alfred St Clair</td>
<td>Wagga Wagga, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARR, Walter</td>
<td>Mudgee, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLARKSON, Mountford Thomas</td>
<td>Newtown, Sydney, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLEMSON, Leslie Horatio</td>
<td>Sydney, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLWELL, Frederick Raymond</td>
<td>Bega, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COOK, Thomas John</td>
<td>Majors Creek, Braidwood, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COOKE, Henry James</td>
<td>Winchester, Hampshire, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CROME, Claude Albert</td>
<td>Sydney, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CULLEN, John Joseph</td>
<td>Balhurst, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CULLEY, Robert</td>
<td>Bolton, Lancashire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EATHER, Roland James</td>
<td>Celo, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDE, Thomas Arthur James</td>
<td>Cundle, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EGAN, Ernest</td>
<td>Forbes, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIELD, Norman Mackay</td>
<td>Sydney, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FILLINGHAM, George Percival</td>
<td>Moolng, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FISH, Robert</td>
<td>Morpeth, Northumberland, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FORREST, Isaac Charles</td>
<td>Cobar, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GORDON, James Edward</td>
<td>Kangoaro Valley, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAWKES, Samuel</td>
<td>Hobart, Tasmania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HUGHES, Luke</td>
<td>Orange, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HUXLEY, Jack Mawle</td>
<td>Kangoaro Valley, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JANION, Alan Cheshyre</td>
<td>Liverpool, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JONES, Edwin Sydney</td>
<td>Newtown, Sydney, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KAY, Harry</td>
<td>Kalootama, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KEKOFF, Michael</td>
<td>Obasty, Kreshko[?], Russia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KELLY, Frederick John</td>
<td>Wollongong, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KEMP, Alfred</td>
<td>Chesterfield, Derbyshire, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KEYS, Charles John</td>
<td>Narrabi, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KING, John Christopher</td>
<td>Coolah, Naper, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KING, William James</td>
<td>Mudgee, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAING, Horace Leslie</td>
<td>Mountain Run, near Trunkey, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOCKIE, George Edgar</td>
<td>Sekirk, Selkirkshire, Scotland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MACGREGOR, Roderick Kenneth</td>
<td>Lewisham, Sydney, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MACK, Jefferson</td>
<td>Adelson, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MASTERS, John Joseph</td>
<td>Sydney, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAYNE, William Henry</td>
<td>Adelaide, SA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCCORMICK, Joseph</td>
<td>South Melbourne, Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCCUSKER, Hugh</td>
<td>Beury Nagehy, Co Tyrone, Ireland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McFADDEN, Robert Joseph</td>
<td>Singleton, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McINTYRE, Thomas Alexandra</td>
<td>Berry, Shoaahaven, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McMATHON, Frederick</td>
<td>Balgownie, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEADOWS, Leslie Matthew</td>
<td>Melbourne, Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEREDITH, Evan Thomas</td>
<td>Kalootama, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MILLAR, Alexander McDermid</td>
<td>Stirling, Scotland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MILLAR, William Barrie Ritchie</td>
<td>Killinchy, Belfast, Co Down, Ireland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MORAIS, Edward William</td>
<td>Tomakin, Moruya, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MUNGER, Aubrey</td>
<td>Mascot, Sydney, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NABIBUX, James Clarence</td>
<td>Moama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NICHOLSON, John Murdock</td>
<td>Narrannra, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIGHTINGALE, Reginald Alfred</td>
<td>Hershams, Sussex, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHILPSON, Francis</td>
<td>Willoughby, Sydney, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PIGG, John Thomas</td>
<td>Hamsterley, Durham, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RADBURN, Archibald</td>
<td>Trunkey, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RALSTON, Arthur</td>
<td>Mount Kembila, Wollongong, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAMSAY, Ernest</td>
<td>London, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICH, Albert James</td>
<td>Summer Hill Creek, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROBERTS, Edward William</td>
<td>Carliford, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RUNDLE, Archie</td>
<td>Plymouth, Greenbank Ward, Devon, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RUSSELL, William Francis Cedric</td>
<td>Darlinghurst, Sydney, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RYAN, Walter Wentworth Stanley</td>
<td>Bathurst, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHUTE, Arthur Jenkin</td>
<td>Redfern, Sydney, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMITH, Frank Rupert</td>
<td>Bega, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMITH, Harold Gordon</td>
<td>Wongarbon, Dubbo, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEVENSON, Alfred Lewis Groom</td>
<td>Redfern, Sydney, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STORIE, Robert</td>
<td>Staveley, Kendal, Westmoreland, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SYKES, James</td>
<td>Althorpe, Doncaster, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THICKETT, Austin</td>
<td>Euston, Durham, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VALE, William David</td>
<td>North Carlton, Melbourne, Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WALSH, Philip Ambrose</td>
<td>Port Macquarie, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WATSON, Albert Sydney</td>
<td>The Valley, Brisbane, Queensland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WATTS, Warren James</td>
<td>Hawkesbury, Windsor, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAY, William Thomas</td>
<td>Ardwick, Manchester, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHEATLEY, Cyril John George</td>
<td>Hobart, Tasmania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WILLIAMSON, John</td>
<td>Bishop Auckland, Newfield, Durham, England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WILSON, Sidney</td>
<td>Millers Point, Sydney, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOODWARD, Frederick Arthur</td>
<td>Burwood, Sydney, NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOOTTON, Sylvanus Kerns</td>
<td>Redfern, Sydney, NSW</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Aftermath

For the first time in the war, the sacrifice made by the Australians brought victory. Messines marked a turning point in the First World War; the rapid and overwhelming defeat inflicted on a German army then at its formidable height, who were determined to hold Messines Ridge ‘at any price’, delivered a visceral shock to the German High Command. If Messines Ridge could not be held, then no position was safe.

In the days following the battle, the Anzac Corps Commander, General Alexander Godley visited the battered 12th Brigade, to which the 45th Battalion belonged, to offer his thanks in person. ‘There is no Brigade in the whole of 2nd Army which did more to achieve that victory than you did.’

Today, approximately 140 Australian soldiers from the 45th Battalion remain unrecovered. Advice was provided to the Army in February 2015 by a civilian military research team headed by Mr Len Kelly with regards to a possible mass grave site of some 86 (named) Australian soldiers from the 45th Battalion AIF reported killed at Messines, Belgium in June 1917. These men are believed to have been buried at a very specific location provided by the 4th Division’s burial officer on the service records of each of the 86 missing soldiers.