

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

MAURICE LEO BARTLETT

Service Number 44889

By William Bartlett, youngest son of above

Like most returned soldiers from the First World War, Dad did not say much, though probably wasn't as reticent as some. At odd times, without prompting, he would give out little snippets, which were not expanded on. The great gulf between his experiences at war and what his family members knew about it prevented any further meaningful discussion. However, since his death, enough of his anecdotes, put together, together with the assistance of more up-to-date information about WW1 give a reasonable idea of his war service.

According to records held at the Auckland Dominion Museum, Dad sailed away to war from Wellington on 9 June 1917, on the Warship 'Willochra' and would have reached England in mid-August, after two months or so, at sea. From Devonport, SouthHampton, he would have gone by train to a station on the Salisbury Plains and marched a few miles to Sling Camp. At Sling Camp, which Dad referred to from time to time, over the years, the skills of trench warfare were practiced, for about a month. As Dad had already been selected for the Machine Gun Corps back in New Zealand, he was later sent to Grantham in Lincolnshire for further specialist machine gun training before going to the front. This could not have been for long - he was at Ypres in Belgium, in the thick of fighting, by October 1917.

Initially, what was written about WW1, was a bit patchy. This particularly applies to the involvement of the NZ Division in this conflict on the Western Front in France and Belgium, after it was sent there in 1916.

Knowing so little about New Zealand's war on the Western Front made it difficult for us to relate to what Dad went through.

It is only in the last few decades that any well-researched comprehensive histories about the NZ Division in Belgium and France have appeared. One of these is "On the Fringe of Hell. New Zealanders and Military Discipline in the First World War" by

Chris Pugsley, published in 1991, which concentrated on conditions of training and service, at the front.

Another - 'Dark Journey' written by Glyn Harper, which came out in 2007- consists of a complete in-depth exploration of the trials and tribulations of the New Zealanders on the Western Front, for the first time. This book especially helped us to establish Dad's war movements and experience, to some extent.

Glyn Harper states that the NZ Division of about 20,000 infantry, artillery and other specialists such as machine gunners were engaged in three major battles between 1916 and 1918, at which it suffered a large proportion of its very high casualties.

These were:

- The attacks on the Passchendaele ridges above Ypres, in October-November 1917
- The defence of the French city of Amiens on the Somme River in March-April 1918, which was a key part of the second battle of the Somme.
- The capture of the village of Bapaume, in August 1918.

We are reasonably certain that dad was at the first two battles, but not the third one at Bapaume.

Dad sometimes did allude to being at Ypres. According to Glyn Harper, the NZ Division was stationed in the Ypres 'salient' from September 1917, until late February 1918 and conducted two notable attacks on German positions towards the Passchendaele, on 4 and 12 October 1917. While the first attack was something of a success, the second, was an unmitigated military disaster. On that morning, the NZ infantry had to flounder through deep mud against uncut barbed wire and pill boxes with little artillery support and thus were mown down in large numbers by enemy fire. Nearly 1000 NZ soldiers were killed outright, in a matter of a few hours. We asked Dad whether he was involved in that attack he said he wasn't as he was one of the machine gunners who was kept in reserve on that fateful day, but he was involved in the previous attack of 4 October 1917.

The only winter Dad had to endure, while on active service in WW1 was at Ypres, during December 1917 and January 1918. Glyn Harper describes that winter as the hardest Europe had experienced for many years and Dad did say how tough winter was in the trenches. Compared to the Germans who were on drier hill country nearby, the area around the destroyed town of Ypres, occupied by the allied forces was low-lying and rather swampy. Furthermore, shelling by enemy artillery had turned it into an extensive mud-hole. The NZ soldiers had to spend a lot of time constructing and maintaining duck boards, trenches and dug-outs, especially after the damage caused by bombardments. Winter snow and ice just made life even more miserable.

After another failed attack by the New Zealanders, in November 1917, there was relatively little fighting around Ypres. But there were still very many casualties, this time due to sickness among the troops. Wet and cold living conditions took their toll. We remember Dad saying that many men had to be sent home, after only a short time, in the front-line, due to trench-feet. At last, in February 1918, the NZ Division was pulled out of the Ypres and set back behind the lines for rest and recreation. The NZ Division suffered low morale and was in urgent need of rebuilding, as a fighting unit. Dad was with the Machine Gun Corps, during this recovery period, for he was certainly present at the next round of fighting, which erupted soon afterwards.

Late in March 1918, the German Army succeeded in breaking through a weak point in the British defences forcing the British to retreat in a disorderly manner, some 40 miles to the Somme River, where they were finally able to reorganise themselves, against the Germans. So began the Second Battle of the Somme.

During this rapid German advance, a dangerous undefended gap opened up between two British army groups, just east of the city of Amiens. On the Western front the British high Command regularly used the colonial troops to spearhead attacks. Therefore, it was not surprising that, in late March 1918, the New Zealanders and an Australian force, including Dad were rushed south by train, lorry and on foot to plug this critical gap. Subsequent bitter fighting to gain the higher ground in this sector ensued with huge casualties, on both sides, but the ANZACS in the end gained the upper hand and the Germans were stopped from advancing any further. Dad recalled that during this battle, they mounted their Vickers machine, behind a fallen log, between two poplar trees, as a firing position. He recalls the continuous thudding of German bullets hailing into the adjacent trees and their log barrier.

We distinctly remember Dad telling us how they rounded up at gun-point many Tommy (British) soldiers who had deserted their units during this offensive. These Tommies were probably running away from the German Army rampaging across open countryside towards Amiens, before meeting ANZAC resistance. Some days later, after the New Zealanders had established a line of defensive trenches, the Germans made one last concerted attempt to push through to Amiens, early in the morning on 5^{April} 1918. They mounted a massive attack preceded by one of the heaviest artillery barrages up to that time. Dad related how, at some point in the battle, he went back from his machine gun post, maybe to get more ammunition, only to find on his return that the soldiers manning their machine gun had received a direct hit from a shell or mortar bomb. Among those killed was his friend Lance-Corporal William (Bill) Jenkins, from the West Coast. Dad used to talk about Bill Jenkins and their intention to get together in NZ, after the war. Official records have the death of Bill Jenkins as 5 April 1918, which puts Dad clearly at the scene of this massive enemy attack. There is a memorial to Bill at the British Cemetery Pas-de-

Calais, France. Reference William (Bill) Robert Jenkins Army: Number 24175. The German offensive in spring 1918 petered out after 5 April and the German army was generally in retreat for the rest of WW1. The war then became more mobile over open ground versus the previous static trench warfare.

We suspect that Dad was absent from the front-line during all of the middle months of 1918 recovering from a shrapnel leg wound. We know that he was wounded in one leg, in which tiny fragments of shrapnel remained, until the day he died.

Over the years, Dad trotted out quite a few short off-the-cuff, sometimes dramatic memories, of the war, such as shaking the hand of a dead German lying on the wire, firing shots in the direction of a visiting British general, rifling the bodies of dead German officers for souvenirs and being able to smell the body odour of the enemy troops in a captured dug-out long after they had abandoned it.

After the end of hostilities in November 1918, Dad was in the army of occupation in Cologne Germany, before coming home in 1919. WW1 soldiers became particularly prone to mental disablement if they were (A) in battle constantly for two years or more, such as what befell some Gallipoli veterans who went on to fight on the Western Front or if (B) misfits socially among other soldiers and could not adjust to military discipline and (C) did not have a decent break from the fighting at any stage. Dad definitely did not fall into any of these categories. While he did have nerve-racking, life-threatening experiences during the combat, it did not go on for more than a year. In Chris Pugsley's book, Dad was not a prime candidate for mental breakdown, due to battle fatigue, over a prolonged period

Dad was fairly fortunate to be a member of a rather elite unit in the army i.e. the machine gunners, who possessed an enormous fire-power and could make a real difference to outcomes on the battlefield, in those days. This would have helped to maintain morale, in the face of adversity. However, overriding this was the appalling casualties suffered by the NZ Division on the Western Front, among whom the Machine Gun Corps. was particularly hard-hit. During battle, machine-gun positions always became top priority targets for the German artillery gunners, which largely accounted for the substantial losses the machine-gunners sustained.

The NZ Machine Gun Corp. was a battalion of about 700 officers and men with an allotment of 64 Vickers guns split up between the four brigades of infantry, in the Division. The official roll of honour for the NZ Machine Gun Corps contains the names of over 500 men killed from 1916 to 1918 on the Western Front, which approaches the total number in the Corps. In addition, it can safely be assumed that over twice that many were evacuated out, due to wounds or sickness. Like Dad, some may have returned to the front, once they were fit enough. Therefore, all the men in the Machine Gun Corporation would have been replaced at least twice, by reinforcements, during 1916-1918: Anyone in the MGC, especially up to September

1918 had little chance of surviving for long in action. When Dad used to say that he was a member of the 'suicide squad' at the war, he was not wrong. I believe Dad was extremely lucky to have come home alive and in one piece.

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