

## WALTER HENRY SERLE MM



Sergeant, 1917

Army Number 3441

Enlisted 31 July 1915, aged 41 years. Embarked (HMAT "Nestor") 11 October 1915 as Private in the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion reinforcements (11<sup>th</sup>) and was taken on strength at Tel el Kebir on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1916. At the end of January, the 8<sup>th</sup> took up garrison duties at the Suez Canal, and training was intensified. On 1<sup>st</sup> March the Battalion was relieved of Canal duties, and 11<sup>th</sup> March they were told of the impending move to France, which occurred on the 26<sup>th</sup>. They travelled on HMT "Megantic", arriving at Marseille on the 31<sup>st</sup> March.

After training around Steenwerck and Bailleul, and an inspection on the 27<sup>th</sup> April by Haig (who congratulated the CO on the Battalion's handling of arms, steadiness and marching), on 30<sup>th</sup> April the 8<sup>th</sup> (1 Aust Div, 2 Inf Bde) moved into the lines at Fleurbaix, a so-called "nursery sector". After having had their first exposure to action on the Western Front, including nightly patrols of no-mans-land and being shelled, they came out of the line on 29<sup>th</sup> May, relocating to Saily on 10<sup>th</sup> June, and later to Neuve Eglise. On 24<sup>th</sup> June they went into the line in the Messines sector. They were relieved on the 4<sup>th</sup> July, and travelling by train and by route marching they reached Rainneville ten days later. During this period, Serle was promoted to Corporal (8<sup>th</sup> July 1916). On 20<sup>th</sup> July they marched by way of Albert, reaching Sausage Valley near Pozieres on the night of the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Throughout 23<sup>rd</sup> July the German artillery pounded the 8<sup>th</sup>. In the evening they moved forward through the village and occupied the area to the North of Pozieres, out as far as the cemetery. They were warned for an attack on the 24<sup>th</sup>, but due to much confusion it did not take place until 3.30am on the 25<sup>th</sup>. It reached all objectives and dug in 50 to 100 yards North and North-East of the village before dawn. During the 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> they continued their slow advance along the enemy trenches, being shelled unmercifully throughout.

[From the 1<sup>st</sup> AIF website:

*"Tuesday 25 JULY Temp 66 deg F; Overcast*

*At 2 a.m. 5th Battalion on the right seized OG1 [Old German trench 1]. When the barrage lifted, OG2 was entered but the Battalion was forced to retire to OG1 due to the strength of the enemy's bombing from both flanks and had to fall back to OG1. After the bombing exchange, the Germans kept possession as far as the railway.*

*On the right, 10th and 19th Battalions, assisted later by two companies of 7th Battalion, were trying to clear a trench connecting the OG lines. A strongpoint in OG1 was captured by 10th Battalion. The Germans remained near the junction of OG2 and Munster Alley.*

*At 3.30 a.m. the securing of Pozieres began. On the right 12th Battalion was exposed to heavy fire from OG1, which prevented it from forming the link with 11th Battalion, who had reached the Light Railway but had come under fire from 8th Battalion, causing some confusion. At day-light 11th Battalion was so heavily shelled that it was withdrawn back to its old line.*

*The 8th Battalion (2 Brigade, lent to 1 Brigade), went through Pozieres and consolidated a position at the cemetery and also put out a line of posts to the orchard. The 4th Battalion bombed up the trench on the west side of the village, capturing 700 yards of trench and linking up with 8th Battalion at the cemetery.*

*At 8.30 a.m. a large force of Germans appeared southwards over the crest near the Pozieres windmill, but the artillery of 1st Australian Division and 25th Division, together with the machine-gun fire from 3 Australian Brigade, brought the attack to a halt.*

*During the night 2nd Australian Division relieved 1st Australian Division"]*

Serle was wounded in action with the 8<sup>th</sup> Bn, 26 July 1916, at Pozieres.

*[The 8<sup>th</sup> was relieved on the early morning of 27<sup>th</sup> July. It suffered 81 killed, 266 wounded and 23 missing, assumed KIA. A fortnight later it was sent back into Pozieres, and from 18<sup>th</sup> August to the 21<sup>st</sup> August it fought at and beyond the Windmill. Two VCs were awarded to the 8<sup>th</sup> during Pozieres.]*

When fit he was allotted to the 60<sup>th</sup> Bn (5 Div, 15 Inf Bde), 13<sup>th</sup> October 1916. The 60<sup>th</sup> was the “sister” battalion to the 8<sup>th</sup>, having been formed after Gallipoli when the experienced battalions were split in half. 15 Bde had recently been involved in the disastrous Fromelles incident (19<sup>th</sup> July), and the 60<sup>th</sup> had lost 16 officers and 741 men killed or wounded in the battle and was in process of re-building. On 14<sup>th</sup> October 15 Bde transferred from Fromelles to Estaires. The transfer was, apparently, a shambles. Winter was setting in, the trenches were full of water and collapsing, and the men were in poor physical condition. Frostbite and trench foot were endemic. During the first week of November the 5th Division was in a failed action at Butte de Warlancourt. On the 16<sup>th</sup> November, the 60<sup>th</sup> embussed on double-deckers for Dernancourt and then proceeded to Mametz Camp. The next move was to the Flers area to relieve a Bn of the Scots Guards at The Needle Trench. Two nights later the 58<sup>th</sup> relieved the 60<sup>th</sup>, who marched back to Montauban, but they were back in the line on the 24<sup>th</sup> in the Switch Trench, later at the Needle Dump. The Bn diarist wrote:

“Bn spent the day in Switch Trench, very wet day, practically no cover for men. No work done to improve the trench as the men were exhausted. Moved to Needle Dump. This trench was found to be very wet, knee high in water.”

Walter became ill, and was evacuated to hospital in England ex 60<sup>th</sup> Bn on 30 November 1916. The RMO (Capt Keith Doig) wrote in his diary:

“25 November. Got to 60<sup>th</sup> Bn at Switch Trench... moved on to Needle Dump. .... Was flooded out and well shelled.....26 November....Went over to Needle Dump. Trench shelled here during the morning....Trench knee deep in mud.....28 November...Not many wounded but the condition of the men is pitiable. 30 November...Evacuated 80 cases trench foot.”

On recovery, he was allotted to 66<sup>th</sup> Bn (6 Div, 17 Inf Bde) in England, 28<sup>th</sup> April 1917 and was promoted to Sergeant 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1917.

He was transferred back to 60<sup>th</sup> Bn and was taken on strength in France 26<sup>th</sup> November 1917. At that time, 5 Div was the northernmost unit of the Australian

Corps (although still known as 1 ANZAC Corps until 1/1/18) in the line between Armentieres and Ypres (the Messines – Wytschaete Sector), having recently come out of the Ypres/Polygon Wood (July-September 1917) battles after First and Second Bullecourt (April and May 1917).

By 30<sup>th</sup> November, the 60<sup>th</sup> was at Torreken Farm, but by 18<sup>th</sup> December the Bn was billeted in the Buessant area, maintaining only a couple of platoons in the front line on rotation.

He was wounded in action again 10<sup>th</sup> March 1918, probably near Messines. Bean records a German patrol engagement with 5 Div on 10<sup>th</sup> March during which some Germans were captured. No Australian casualties are noted. He also mentions that on March 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> the activity of the German artillery on the Messines front began noticeably to increase.

*[Bean has 5 Div in the Messines sector between 15<sup>th</sup> November and 17<sup>th</sup> December, and later from the 1<sup>st</sup> February to the 26<sup>th</sup> March, under BRIG "Pompey" Elliot's command.. There was much large scale raiding by the Australians, and retaliatory raids by the Germans. This was an important phase in Monash's development of his troops' skills and morale.]*

*[The Germans began their final major push of the war on 21 March 1918. To help deal with this, the 5<sup>th</sup> Division began a move South to the vicinity of Corbie where the 3<sup>rd</sup> Div was holding a line roughly following the Ancre River. By 4<sup>th</sup> April Villers-Bretonneux was under bombardment, but the German advance was halted, the 33<sup>rd</sup>, 34<sup>th</sup>, 35<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> Bns being instrumental in the defence. The British in due course relieved them. At 0415 hours on 24<sup>th</sup> April the Germans rolled forward again, and by 1900 hours VB was in German hands. The 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Bdes successfully counter-attacked that evening at midnight. VB was never again threatened. During May, and for half of June, 15 Bde was in reserve although still within range of artillery. By late June they were in the Morlancourt Sector near Dernancourt. The first Americans were now training with the Australians. Raiding parties and artillery barrages were the daily activities as a part of the Bdes' contribution to Hamel 4<sup>th</sup> July.]*

Sgt W H Serle rejoined 60<sup>th</sup> Bn in France on the 9<sup>th</sup> of July 1918. The 60<sup>th</sup> was at that time Left Support Bn in the Mericourt area, and relieved the 58<sup>th</sup> in the right sector on the 12<sup>th</sup>. The Bde was pulled out of the line on the 17<sup>th</sup> July. 15 Bde was moved to billets in St Gratien and Franvilliers, but by 2<sup>nd</sup> August was preparing for the grand finale, on the move towards VB. On the 5<sup>th</sup> they were at Bois l'Abbe.

On 8<sup>th</sup> August the 60<sup>th</sup> was in action from the first day as second Bn on the right, behind the 57<sup>th</sup>. At 0130 they moved towards the starting tapes "in front of Villers-Bretonneux", and at 0320 the tanks moved into position. At 0520 they moved forward, and were soon called upon to supply companies to assist the 57<sup>th</sup> and the Canadians on their right, particularly at Guillaucourt. Then, at 0900 on the 9<sup>th</sup>, the Canadians requested assistance from 15 Bde in a pending attack. The 60<sup>th</sup> was on the move at 1000 hours and attacked south of Harbonnieres at 1110 against very stiff opposition, passing south of Vauvilliers and reaching a position north of Rosieres two miles away by 1300. The 8<sup>th</sup> Bn relieved the 60<sup>th</sup> at 1.45pm on 9<sup>th</sup> August near Rosieres.

On 10<sup>th</sup> August the 60<sup>th</sup> was out of the line at Vecquemont, and later at Vaire-sous-Corbie on the Somme. The advance continued, and 15 Bde was involved in minor ways at Proyart, Chuignolles and Chuignes. By the end of August they were called on to relieve 8 Bde at Villers Carbonnel for the attack on Peronne. By now the troops were not in good condition due to continual shelling and gassing.

On 1<sup>st</sup> September the 60<sup>th</sup> were struggling to get through the marshes South of Peronne, but by the 2<sup>nd</sup> they had advanced to near Peronne aerodrome, and relieved the 55<sup>th</sup> Bn which had been very badly cut up in the AO. On the night of 3<sup>rd</sup> September the 60<sup>th</sup> advanced through the 59<sup>th</sup> with fighting patrols and occupied the Aizecourt road. Consolidation continued, and by 6<sup>th</sup> September the 60<sup>th</sup> were in possession of St Denis Wood, NE of Peronne. They rested for two weeks near Peronne.

Serle was transferred to the 59<sup>th</sup> Bn on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1918 on the disbandment of the 60<sup>th</sup> which was the only battalion in the AIF to obey the disbandment order, under the noteworthy leadership of Brigadier Elliott, but the men held it against Pompey after the Divisional Commander failed to enforce the changes on the other selected battalions.

The 15<sup>th</sup> Bde moved out towards the Hindenburg Line on the 27<sup>th</sup> September. Directly west of Bellicourt the 5<sup>th</sup> Australian Division and the 30<sup>th</sup> American Division assembled on a jumping-off line only 1000 yards from the Hindenburg Line. The attack went in on the 29<sup>th</sup>, the 59<sup>th</sup> Bn moving towards Malekoff Farm at the northern end of the 5 Div zone. Unfortunately, the American assault which was supposed to clear the way for the Australians had failed, largely due to inexperience, and the Americans were retiring. This meant that artillery support was not available because the location of the Americans was not known. After fierce hand to hand fighting in company with the 44<sup>th</sup> Bn, the 59<sup>th</sup> established itself on the tunnel mound (of the St Quentin Canal) just north of Bellicourt by 1100. It then fought its way northwards up the Hindenburg trenches. Later the 59<sup>th</sup> arrived at the Le Catelet line, well beyond the village and the canal, but was then recalled into reserve at the tunnel mouth. At 0600 on the 1<sup>st</sup> October, 15 Bde launched an attack with the village of Estrees as the main objective. By nightfall it was secure. The ridge to the NW of the village created some difficulty, but was taken by dusk. 2 Div relieved the 5<sup>th</sup> after dark. For most Australian troops it was the end of the war.

Serle was wounded for the third time in action with 59<sup>th</sup> Bn being evacuated on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 1918. He was awarded the Military Medal (London Gazette, 13<sup>th</sup> May 1919, Second Supplement [14<sup>th</sup> May], Page 59) for an action with 59<sup>th</sup> Bn:

"For conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty, on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1918 near BELLICOURT he showed great bravery and determination when his platoon was attacked by enemy bombing parties. It was largely due to his personal bravery and skill that all the attacks were repulsed. Until wounded, his utter disregard for personal safety, and boldness in dealing with the attacks were the means of saving the situation and were an inspiring example to all."

*[From the AWM site:  
St Quentin Canal*

*Originally built to connect the Somme and Scheldt Rivers, the Germans utilised the St Quentin Canal as an additional defensive barrier forward of the Hindenburg Line. East of Peronne the canal ran through a tunnel for approximately six kilometres between Bellicourt and Venhuille. As this "bridge" over the canal formed an obvious point at which to attack the Hindenburg Line it was heavily defended. Fearing an attack across the canal would be costly, Lieutenant General Monash decided to assault over the top of the tunnel. With the Australian Corps exhausted from almost continuous operations since 8 August, Monash had only two divisions in a reasonable state for combat - the 3rd and 5th - and was thus reinforced with the 27th and 30<sup>th</sup> United States Divisions. The plan was for the numerically superior Americans to breach the Hindenburg Line above the tunnel, and another defensive line a kilometre to the rear. The Australians would then pass through and assault the Beaufort Line, another four kilometres back. The attack would be supported by 90 tanks and heavy artillery concentrations. The inexperience of the Americans was telling. An operation launched to secure the start line on 27 September 1918 was unsuccessful due to their failure to properly clear dugouts and trenches. The same mistakes were repeated by the 27th Division when the actual attack was launched two days later. The 3rd Australian Division, trying to advance to its own start line, became embroiled in the fight for the Americans' first objective. With all of the tanks destroyed or disabled, and the uncertain position of the forward troops preventing the use of artillery, the battle degenerated into a struggle for individual strong points, fought with bombs, bayonets and Lewis guns, that lasted for another three days. The 30th American Division, attacking further to the south, was more successful, enabling the 5th Australian Division to pass through and capture the heavily fortified village of Bellicourt. Their progress, however, was hampered by the lack of it in the north. Even further south the British 9th Corps had managed to cross the canal, breach the Hindenburg Line, and begin advancing upon the Beaufort Line. This action threatened to outflank the positions along the tunnel, resulting in a gradual German withdrawal that began on the night of 30 September. By 2 October a gap of approximately 17 kilometres had been opened in the Hindenburg Line. The operation had cost the 3rd and 5th Australian Divisions 2,577 casualties. ]*

He returned to Australia 16<sup>th</sup> March 1919, "Czaritza", trans-shipping to "Dunluce Castle" at Alexandria 7<sup>th</sup> April 1919.

The effects of his wounds and gassing persisted throughout the remainder of his life. He died in Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital in 1954. He never married.

His younger brother, Edwin Hamilton Serle, also a life-long bachelor, was created OBE in 1920 for his service as Director of Military Intelligence.

Lest We Forget.

Collated by his Great Nephew, J David Grierson, 2006

Further Reading:

"Cobbers in Khaki": the history of the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion 1914-1919 by Ronald J Austin.

"Hold Hard Cobbers" (59<sup>th</sup>) by Robin S Corfield.

"To the Last Ridge" by W H Downing.

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