

ALEXANDER EDWARD MERLEHAN

[A tribute on the centenary of his death in action during The Great War, 5 October 1917]
by

Gary Kellar¹



At the time Alex left Australia to serve in the Great War he was still only 18 years of age. He was not old enough to register to vote or appear on any official public documents, the age of majority at that time being 21 years. Consequently apart from his birth certificate and his military enlistment no formal documentation is available to tell us much about his early life.

We know he was born on 23rd August 1897 at Boonah in South East Queensland to Richard and Margaret Merlehan. He grew up at the family home at Mt French in the Fassifern Valley, Queensland.

Little is known about his youthful days in the rolling rural country west of Boonah and there is no information about him travelling further afield as his brother Charles did. Our first official record is his enlistment.



Fassifern Valley and Teviot Ranges²

¹ Gary Kellar is the grandson of Alex's sister Marcella Rimkus

² (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=15590713>)

Alex was the middle child of a brood of twelve (six boys and six girls). Of the boys, Richard Jnr died in infancy, Charles and Alex enlisted and William (Bill) and Harold stayed at home farming and helping to provide the essential agricultural products to sustain the nation while their brothers were overseas. Young Clarence (Clarrie) was only born in 1911 but served in World War II in the Australian Army's 133rd General Transport Company.

Clearly the family were patriotic Australians. However their genes had thoroughly Irish roots.

Alex's paternal grandparents Charles Merlehan and Catherine (O'Reilly) arrived in Australia from Ireland (Tipperary it is thought) in 1855.

Alex's mother Margaret's maiden name was Barry. Her mother Mary Connell emigrated from Bandon, Ireland in 1854 and her husband (Alex's maternal grandfather) Michael Barry arrived in Australia from Waterford, Ireland as a convict in 1835. Consequently the familiar Irish trait of being always ready to challenge authority was deep in Alex's make-up...as we shall see as his story unfolds.

Alex signed up on 28th December 1915. The records show he was 18 years and 4 months old, 5 feet 8 inches tall, weighing 120 pounds with a chest measurement of 31-33.5 inches. His complexion was dark with grey eyes and dark brown hair. His religion was noted as "RC" and his occupation as labourer.

There seems to have been some initial uncertainty as to where he would be assigned as his record shows various postings in his early days, first to 10th Battalion from 28/12/15 to 21/1/16 and then to 35th Battalion from 22/1/16 to 21/2/16. These were not Queensland units and at that time the 10th was already abroad fighting at Gallipoli. It is possible he was being considered as an addition to reinforcement units being raised for them

Nevertheless Alex was finally posted to "A" Company, 41st Battalion at Enoggera in Brisbane on 22nd February 1916. The 41st Battalion was also the unit to which his brother Charles had been assigned.

It seems that Alex may have had a romanticised view of what military life should be and in particular he may have had a fascination with the Australian Light Horse, as his portrait which hung in my grandmother's home for many years shows him dressed in a slouch hat with the Emu Feathers emblem of the Light Horse, even though the 41st Battalion was an infantry unit of a more modest profile. The portrait was taken by photographers in Boonah.

Once enlisted in the army Alex's story until June 1917 largely follows that of his brother Charles which is told in the previous chapter found that this link.

<http://www.reinforcements.com.au/private-charles-merlehan/>

Their training at Bells Pocket Camp in Brisbane and movement to Sydney to embark on the *Demosthenes* are detailed in that article.

However there are some significant differences to be seen in Alex's acceptance of army life. Where Charles appears to have settled in well and risen to a position of high confidence with his senior officers, to a point where he was attached to the company headquarters, Alex at least during his first year with the 41st Battalion was to come to the notice of his superiors for different reasons.

His official army records indicated that in March 1916 while at the training camp at Bell's Pocket, Alex was given home leave and was due to return to camp on 6th March. He overstayed his leave and didn't return until three days later on the 9th. His record shows that he was "*admonished*" and fined three day's pay.

Only a few weeks later he absconded from camp again and went missing for three weeks between 17th April and 9th May. There is no official record of where he was during that time, but it is believed he just went home. This time on his return he received 28 days detention. Sadly the period he was away from camp included Anzac Day when the 41st Battalion participated in the march through Brisbane as a mark of their graduation from training. It would have been a proud moment for his brother Charles but no doubt diminished by Alex's absence.

By mid-May the Battalion was in Sydney and embarked on the HMAT (His Majesty's Australian Transport) *Demosthenes*. It sailed from Sydney on 18th May heading for Europe via Western Australia.



NCOs of "A" Company 41st Battalion on board the Demosthenes 1916.³

³ (<http://williamarthurfraser.blogspot.com.au>)

On 19 June the vessel arrived at Cape Town, South Africa where it lay over for nine days. Although no general leave was granted to the troops while in port, the Battalion history reveals that excursions were arranged along with sports carnivals and route marches to keep the men occupied. During this time Alex again displayed his rebellious streak and was found missing – no doubt doing a little exploring of his own. His record shows “*Breaking away from quarters when on active service...forfeit 20 days pay and three shillings expenses*”.

He was not the only one however as the Battalion history records that those coming back from shore “*gave glowing accounts of the time they had in the city. Indeed so loath were they to leave it that it is regrettable to record that compulsion was necessary to get all on board in time for leaving port.*”⁴

After this it seems that Alex may have become more compliant and perhaps preferred not to lose so much of his pay for a few hours of freedom, as his record does not disclose any further instances of disobedience. His story resumes the same path as Charles’s with arrival in England and further training until the Battalion embarked for France in November.

CHRISTMAS AT THE FRONT

In December 1916 the Division moved into the Armentieres sector and spent much of the time being familiarised with life just behind the front line. Three days before Christmas the whole Battalion marched some five or six miles to Steenwerck where it was for the first time reviewed by the Commander in Chief, Sir Douglas Haig. “*The day was far from enjoyable*” the Division history records. “*as one had to stand about in the mud for hours, and, naturally, it rained.*”⁵

At that time, not really knowing the horrors of war the troops were anxious for their first trip to the trenches. For this their turn came on Christmas Eve of all days. On Christmas day “*Boxes of Comforts were distributed among the men in the trenches, but it was a cold, cheerless day, and there were the usual artillery “strafes”.*”⁶

The European winter of 1916/17 was the coldest on record and life in the trenches consisted mainly of keeping your head down, trying to keep warm and avoid being hit by shrapnel from artillery bombardments or a sniper’s bullet. The weather was so bad that fighting along the whole front was practically stationary apart from the odd raid on enemy trench systems to take prisoners and find out what units were opposing them. Many of the Aussies saw snow for the first time in their lives but the novelty waned when February turned the landscape frozen and conditions in the trenches worsened. Casualties from fighting were few and most were evacuations of sick to hospital.

⁴ The Forty-First, Imperial War Museum, London pp14-15

⁵ The Forty-First, Imperial War Museum, London p27

⁶ Ibid p30

On 19th February Alex was admitted to the 9th A.F.A. Field Hospital with “Dermatitis”. This was the medical term for what the men called “Trench Feet” and despite the troops being provided with whale oil to rub into their feet, many found it more useful “for frying biscuits in”.⁷ He was discharged and returned to the Division on 1st March.



The frozen monotony of this phase of Alex’s time at the front was only made bearable by the camaraderie of the “diggers” and their ability to find amusement in irony. This was helped by the cartoons produced at the time by Captain Bruce Bairns-father who supplied a prolific commentary on ludicrous army practice in such conditions, which the troops enjoyed with hilarity.

The caption reads *"The Things that Matter. Scene: Loos, during the September offensive. Colonel Fitz-Shrapnel receives the following message from 'G.H.Q.' 'Please let us know, as soon as possible, the number of tins of raspberry jam issued to you last Friday.'"*⁸

On 13th March Alex was again admitted to the Field Hospital this time suffering from mumps which also was widespread within the Division. The next day the entire Division was moved to the St. Omer locality and Alex was transferred to the hospital there, the same place as Charles had been in December with his bout of mumps. Like Charles, Alex was then transferred to the larger 7th General Hospital facility at Etaples in the Pas-de-Calais on 31st March. He was discharged on 4th April but by the 15th April he was back in the 9th A.F.A. Field Hospital with Dermatitis. He finally re-joined the Battalion on 7th May 2017.



A ward in the General Hospital at Etaples.

⁷ Ibid p37

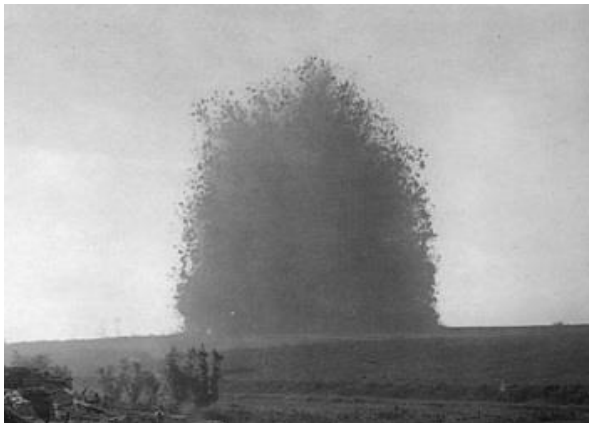
⁸ <https://www.worldwar1postcards.com/bruce-bairnsfather.php>

JUNE 1917

In the prelude to the Battle of Messines, Alex's brother Charles was killed during an enemy artillery barrage.

We do not know when Alex heard of his brother's death but he did not have time to reflect on it very much as the following days signalled the start of the great battle of Messines Ridge. Although the 41st was to be relieved by the assaulting battalions this was not achieved easily. As the Battalion history records

*This relief... " was carried out under extremely dramatic conditions, a heavy artillery bombardment, consisting mostly of gas, raging at the time. Without intermission, with that whistling sound peculiar to gas, the shells rained in along the front, and Ploegsteert Wood was white with chlorine and H.E. (High Explosive). The Wood itself in this storm was a scene of wild confusion, where masked ingoing and outgoing troops, carrying parties, wounded, staff and working parties jostled each other in their semi-blindness... No sooner was the relief completed... than we were reorganised into carrying parties to take up ammunition, food, water and engineering material to the captured line... In spite of heavy artillery shelling these parties ran the gauntlet continuously and despite heavy casualties never failed to deliver the material entrusted to them at its rightful destination."*⁹



This action has a significant part in military history in that it was presaged by the firing of 19 large mines – four of them along the Divisional front, the explosion of which was heard for many miles, and reportedly across the Channel in England.

One of the 19 large mines detonated under the German lines at Messines in June 1917¹⁰

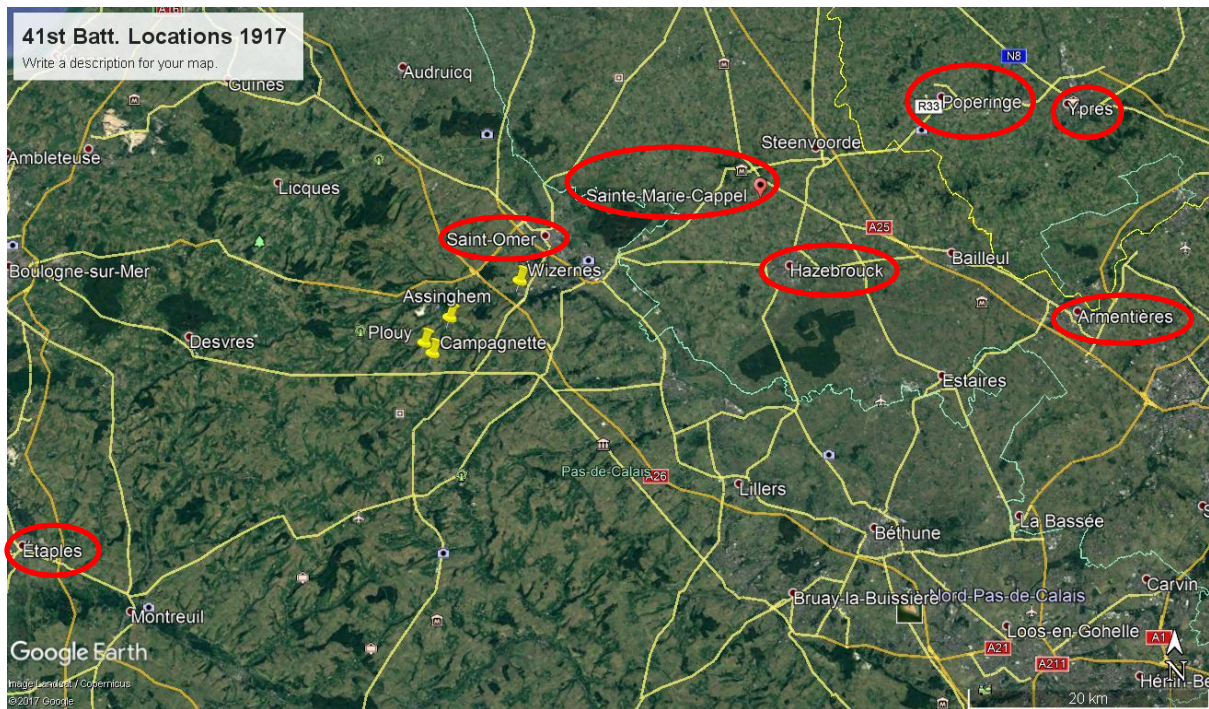
After a few days the Battalion was withdrawn to the rear for a short break. By 21st June they were back in the front line on the Ridge where they served for 18 days with most of the time spent making or repairing defences while dodging barrages thrown at them by *"the enemy artillery or the rat-a- tat-tat of a Boche machine gun traversing the line"*.¹¹

On 3rd August they were evacuated from the front exhausted from the constant heavy work in the pouring rain and mud. Over the next fortnight whether by train or route march they moved around the countryside behind the lines to places named Neuve Eglise, Steerwerth, Hazebrouck, Saint Marie Cappel, Wizernes, Plouy, Campagnette, Fordebecque and finally to Assinghem on the river Aa, about 10 kilometres south-west of Saint Omer, where they settled in for nearly two months.

⁹ The Forty-First, Imperial War Museum, London p45

¹⁰ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2058917/Remembrance-Day-2011-Haunting-pictures-Great-Wars-battlefields.html>

¹¹ The Forty-First, Imperial War Museum, London p49



A map showing some of the towns through which Alex and his mates moved during 1917.¹²

In Assinghem which was about 50 km away from the front they reorganised, resupplied and undertook training for a new phase of the war. By now the generals had discovered the benefits of the “creeping barrage”, a tactic whereby an advance across dangerous ground by the troops would be made behind the protective curtain of an artillery barrage that move forward in front of the troops. The Battalion practised this manoeuvre in preparation for the next big push.

As a form of graduation ceremony the entire third division was paraded on 22nd September at Drionville to be inspected by the commander-in-chief, Sir Douglas Haig.

On the 26th they moved back to Assinghem and after a few more days route march to Poperinge “CAMP 30”. Here again they practised the creeping barrage manoeuvres. This location was not far from the front line astride the Ypres-Zonnebeke Railway which was to become a significant feature in Alex’s fate. The camp here was subjected to nightly bombing raids by German aircraft although the Battalion suffered few casualties from this.

BACK TO YPRES

On 3 October the Battalion entrained at Brandhoek Siding and entered Ypres for the first time. They disembarked at the old Asylum and camped on the ground beside the cemetery on the Menin road. The irony of these locations was not lost on the troops.

¹² https://www.viamichelin.fr/web/Cartes-plans/Carte_plan-Assinghem-62380-Pas_de_Calais-France



The old Asylum

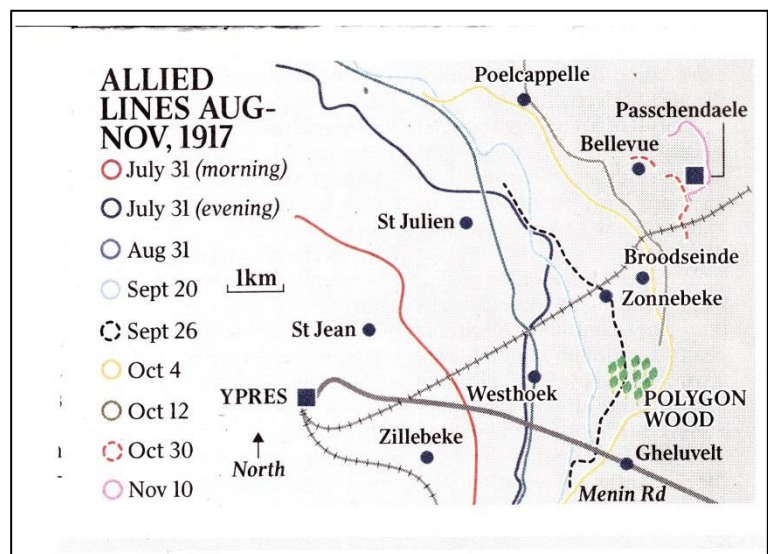


Signage on the Menin Road – note the arrow pointing to “Hell Fire Corner”

<http://www.miltonhistoricalsociety.ca/military/project-reports/the-anderson-fonds/the-anderson-fonds-known-photographs/the-anderson-fonds-ypres-belgium/>

There was much activity in Ypres at this time in preparation for what was to become “the third phase of the third battle of Ypres” or the battle of Broodseinde.¹³

This was to follow on from the great but costly success the Australians had achieved in the battle of Polygon Wood in late September.



¹³ Map illustration The Australian 26.9.17 p 11

The Battalion records read as follows:

"This battle was fought on a frontage of 10 miles, and the Australians were given the place of honour in the centre. The third division attacked along the Ypres-Zonnebecke Railway,... It was intended from here to capture the Passchendaele Ridge, but the severity of the weather made it impossible for the troops who participated in the third phase to carry out this task. At 11 pm after a hot meal the advance march began. Picking our way amongst the debris and shell holes along the railway embankment, under desultory shelling, we reached the viaduct. Here we had to lie up for an hour while assembly tapes were put out. The front was by no means quiet, and this hour, spent under continuous shelling is numbered amongst the longest ever passed by many. At length a further move forward to Bremen Redoubt was made, and although the assembly place was here, it was thought inadvisable to stay, so we moved across the Zonnebecke River. In crossing we had at least thirty casualties.

We had to run the gauntlet of a heavy area shoot on the three duckboard bridges which spanned this waste of mud and water, and two out of three were destroyed under our feet. Shelter was taken in shell holes in rear of the three battalions who were to take the first three objectives. Our role was to take the fourth and final one..."¹⁴

It was now the 4th October.

"Half an hour after we arrived (5:30 am) the Germans put down an intense barrage, which fortunately fell mostly on the Zonnebecke and Bremen Redoubts in rear of us. Rain commenced to fall steadily. In waterlogged shell holes, all longed for the hour of action to arrive. Prompt to the second, at 6 am the British barrage dropped with the sound of thunder. Perhaps never in the history of this war was there such a concentration of artillery in one place as in the Ypres salient at this period. It was impossible to pick out the sound of any one gun; the air was filled with a dull roar, and a scene such as Dante in his "Inferno" could not have imagined was unfolded. Stretching away on both flanks further than the eye could see, was nothing but pulsating waves of red and white and purple, belching forth a whirlwind of death in front of our advancing infantry.

After three minutes of this- Furies let loose - the gathering of troops along the front moved forward, and we with them. The attack commenced in darkness. In the Hades, all recognised formations went by the board, and columns of lumps picked their way forward, reckoning nought of casualties caused by the enemy barrage. Although actually our share in the fighting was not to commence until the other three battalions had captured their objectives, our more adventurous spirits pushed forward with the leading waves, and participated in all the fighting that came their way. All opposition was completely overcome...

The first two objectives were taken by the 43^d and 42nd battalions. After the second objective was passed the "going" was very bad, especially north of the railway line. In a quagmire of mud knee deep and tangled barb wire, we lost the barrage, and after very heavy losses carried the objective at the point of the bayonet."¹⁵

¹⁴ The Forty-First, Imperial War Museum, London p62

¹⁵ Ibid p63

Having secured their ground the battalion was then required to defend it against repeated counter-attacks throughout that day and during the 5th October. They held the line under the usual artillery fire until early morning of 6th October when they were relieved by the 66th British Division. Exhausted, they were evacuated to the Asylum for a hard earned hot meal and sleep.



(View of No Man's Land after the attack on Broodseinde looking toward the German lines)¹⁶

No records can tell us just when or where Alex fell amongst this maelstrom. Was he one of the thirty who fell crossing the Zonnebeke River before the main engagement? Was he one of the *“more adventurous spirits”* who rushed in with the leading waves against the pillboxes of Hill 40? Was he lost in the *“very bad going”* north or the railway line *“in a quagmire of mud knee-deep and tangled barbed wire”*? Did he fall gallantly defending the repeated German counter-attacks and artillery barrages of that long 48 hours.

Wherever it was, Alex was buried in haste and his grave has never been identified other than *“in the vicinity of Zonnebeke”*.

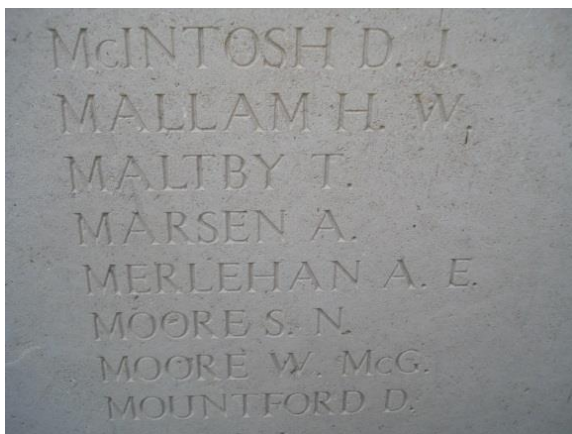
Unlike his brother Charles no record of the Commanding Officer's letter home survives so we have no personal reflection by his comrades on his passing. His mother Margaret wrote on several occasions seeking news of whether his grave had been found but to no avail. One poignant letter to the C.O. includes her plaintive admission *“I had a very vivid death presentiment at the time of [his] death.”*

¹⁶ This image is available from the Collection Database of the Australian War Memorial under the ID Number: E00820. Courtesy Wiki Commons

Alex was posthumously awarded the British 1914/15 Star, The British War Medal and the Victory Medal. Margaret was awarded a further one pound per fortnight compensatory pension in addition to that awarded in relation to Charles.



Like many others not found, Alex's sacrifice is remembered by the inscription of his name on the Menin Gate and the nightly ceremonial recognition of those lost battalions in unmarked graves, by the playing of the last post.



See the ceremony here. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7CkfcMWwtI>