

CHARLES HENRY MERLEHAN

[A tribute on the centenary of his death in action during The Great War, 3 June 1917]

By Gary Kellar

Charles was the son of Richard and Margaret Merlehan and was born on 14 January 1888 at Boonah in Queensland. He was one of the 12 children (6 boys and 6 girls) born to this family.

Mary (b.1883)

Richard (b 1884 – died an infant)

Marcella - called Stella (b.1885) Marcella was my grandmother.

Charles (b.1888)

Ellen (b. 1890)

Leila – called Daisy (b.1893)

Margaretta (b.1895)

Alexander (b.1897)

Cecilia – called Sis (b. 1899)

William (b. 1905)

Harold (b.1907)

Clarence (b. 1911)



His early life was spent at the family home at Mount French via Boonah. In 1912 his father's occupation was described on the Australian Electoral Roll as Teamster.

The 1913 Australian Electoral Roll shows Charles living at Rainworth via Springsure in Central Queensland and working as a Labourer. There he joined the Loyal Springsure Lodge of Oddfellows.

The next year saw the outbreak of war between the European powers and by virtue of Australia's membership of the British Empire at the time, Australia automatically joined Britain in the fight. At the time of Charles's enlistment he was back at French's Creek labouring.

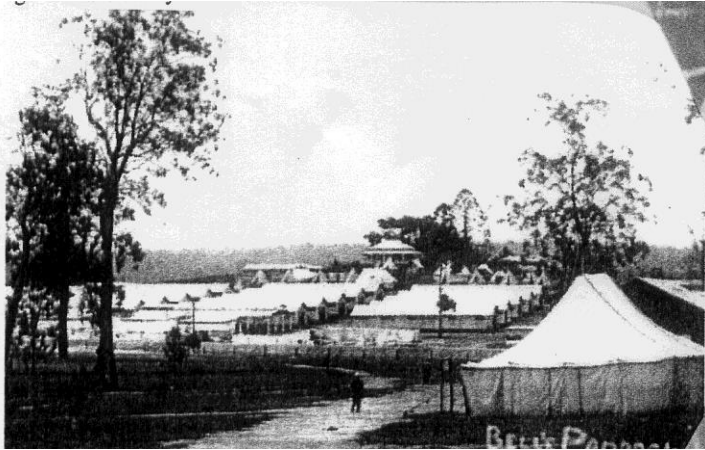
As with many young men of the time Charles no doubt saw joining the army as not only a way of escaping the drudgery of life as a labourer in rural communities, but also as a chance to see the world and take part in a great adventure....at least that's how the Army recruiters painted it to the young impressionable men in 1915.

Charles joined the 3rd Division of Australian Imperial Force on 17 November 1915 and was assigned to "A" Company, 41st battalion. At that time his age was listed as 26 years and 10 months and his trade was listed as labourer. His height was 5 feet 7 1/2 inches and he weighed 129 pounds. His complexion is described as fair with blue eyes and fair hair. His distinctive marks comprised a scar on his right groin from a hernia operation. His religion is shown as Roman Catholic.¹

Charles younger brother Alexander (Alex) joined up a month later and was assigned to the same unit. Alex's story is worth its own telling and will follow in a future article.

¹ Acknowledgement is given to the official Service Records provided by the Australian Government as the source of much of the information contained in this article concerning Charles's movements and locations during his final year.

The 41st Battalion was being newly created at the time as a wholly Queensland unit within the 3rd Division of the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF). As the Battalion's ranks began to swell with recruits their training was undertaken at Bells Paddock camp – now the site of Enoggera Army Camp – in Brisbane.



<http://mitchymemories.blogspot.com.au/2012/02/site-24-bells-paddock.html>

Charles would have lived in the tent city shown above as he first underwent basic training and then the wider Battalion manoeuvres required to ensure thousands of men and their supporting equipment, heavy weapons and supplies could be moved swiftly and deployed to best effect against their enemy. By 15th May 1916 they were considered ready and after a patriotic march through Brisbane they boarded trains to take them to Sydney which was the port of embarkation for troop ships leaving for The War.



[The 41st Battalion marching through Brisbane 1916 –Image courtesy Imperial War Museum]

The journey by rail from Brisbane to Sydney in 1916 took about two days and on 17th May 1916, the same day as arriving, Charles, Alex and their mates of the 41st embarked on the HMAT (His Majesty's Australian Transport) Demosthenes. They were issued with hammocks, blankets and mess kits and assigned areas of the ship they were to occupy during the voyage.



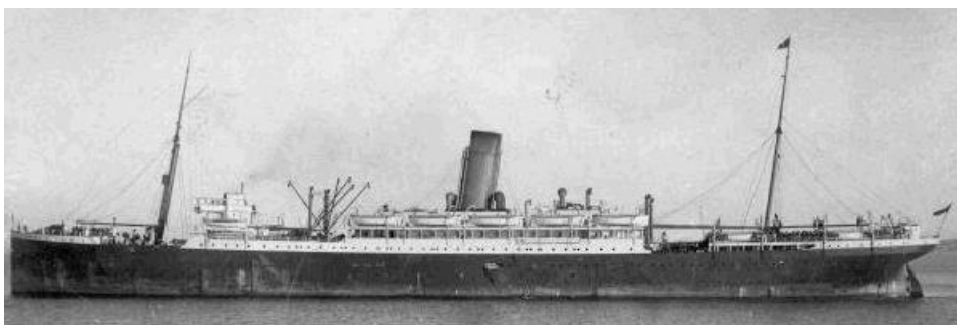
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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[Soldiers waiting to board the Demosthenes 1916. Image courtesy Australian War Memorial]

{Of interest is that the ship was named after a Greek statesman, orator and patriot of the 4th Century BC who had a reputation for urging the Greeks to establish an effective military force to defend the nation against impending invasion by Macedon. Built in 1911 in Belfast as a White Star line passenger ship, Demosthenes was leased with a number of other ships by the Australian Government to transport troops to the European war. As a family member of the White Star line the Demosthenes was related to the Titanic.}

http://alh-research.tripod.com/ships_lh.htm



HMAT Demosthenes

At 2pm on the 18th May the ship headed south from Sydney, its destination a secret, and sailed through Bass Strait calling in at Albany, Western Australia to re-supply with coal. The crossing of the Great Australian Bight was described in the Battalion history as “exceedingly rough” and “a horrible nightmare” for many of the lads who had never seen the sea let alone sailed on it.

The rough weather continued during the next leg of the journey to Capetown, South Africa. The Demosthenes lay over there for 9 days waiting to join a convoy of four other ships before moving into the Atlantic.

Whilst the troops did not receive any general shore leave while at Capetown, on-shore sporting and training activities including route marches were organised to keep the young men occupied. Once away from Capetown the troops found the sailing more enjoyable as the weather improved. It also became known that the ship's destination was Europe and not Egypt or India.

The early twentieth century was a great era of ocean travel and as was the tradition of the time the troops of the 41st Battalion on board the Demosthenes entered into the hijinks and celebrations of Crossing the Equator. This usually involved a mock trial held by "Neptune's Court" to "convict" those who were crossing the line for the first time. The predictable result was the issuing of ritual punishments such as shaving heads, walking the plank and dunking in tubs of seawater. Charles and Alex would not have escaped their fate as the Battalion history tells us that Neptune's search parties scoured the vessel to bring forward any trying to avoid the public humiliation to be summarily dealt with – regardless of rank.



US Troops in WW2 observe the age old tradition of Crossing the Line

The Demosthenes sailed on to St Vincent in the Cape Verde Islands where she re-supplied with coal and then left the convoy to head for the island of Madeira in the Azores. Looking out from the Demosthenes' portholes in Funchal Harbour, Charles and Alex would have been amazed to see the more than a dozen large German merchant ships, part of the German trading armada that plied the African coast before the War. These large ships (6,000- 8,000 tons each) had been impounded by the Portuguese authorities at Britain's request in February precipitating Germany declaring war of Portugal and therefore the latter's entry in the War.

On the next leg of the journey all on board became acutely aware of entering the real war zone as the number of submarine lookouts were doubled and regular life boat drills were held.

On 20 July 1916 the coast of England came into view and the ship docked in Devenport/Plymouth. The troops disembarked only to immediately entrain for their home for the next few months at Lark Hill Camp, Amesbury, and Salisbury Plain. Here they were introduced to hitherto unfamiliar concepts of trench warfare and fighting while wearing gas masks.

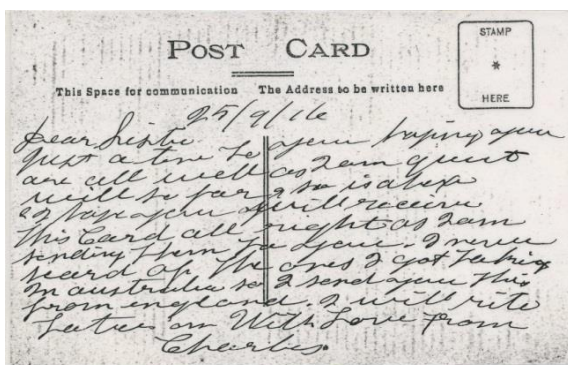
By all accounts the camp facilities at Lark Hill were quite comfortable with galvanised iron huts, electricity, baths, washroom and drying room, large and well equipped kitchens and mess rooms. *“In the vicinity were Y.M.C.A. recreation and reading and writing huts, several cinema halls, and shops in which small necessities could be bought.”*

The weeks passed quickly with training in *“bayonet-fighting, trench digging and musketry practice...especially rapid fire and sharp-shooting”*.

Most of the men in Charles’s unit were well used to labouring on farms and in the mines of Mount Morgan (Queensland) and so were quite amused when “instructed” by an officer of the Imperial Army in how to handle a pick and shovel army style.

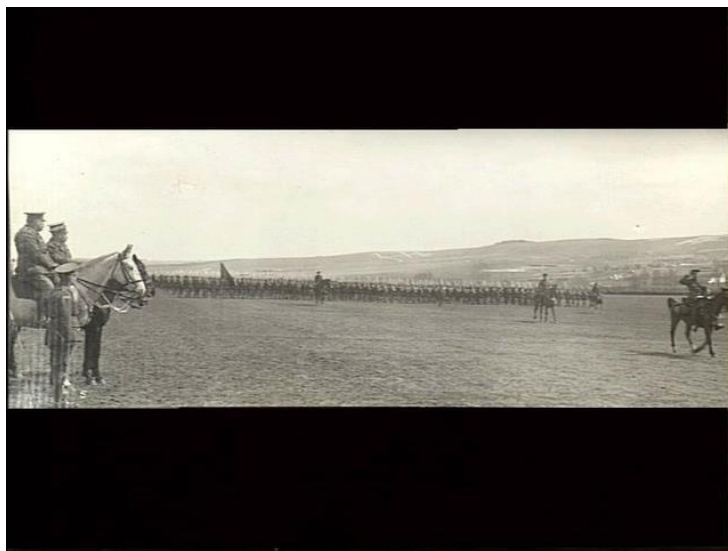
The troops were given two periods of leave in the latter half of the year to enable them to visit London and more distant parts of the British Isles and each week end a good number of personnel were granted time off to enjoy being in the “Mother Country”. It was on one of these outings on 25th September 1916 that Charles purchased a post card to send to one of his sisters. It reads:

“Dear Sister,
Just a line to you hoping you are all well as I am quite well so far and so is Alex. I hope you will receive this card all right as I am sending them to you. I never heard of the ones I got taken in Australia so I send you this from England. I will write later on.
With love from Charles.”



Two days after Charles penned this note the Battalion was paraded in the pouring rain. The grumbles subsided however as the clouds parted and the troops stepped out proudly to be reviewed by the King.

King George V reviewing elements of the 3rd Division AIF on Salisbury Plain 1917. Image courtesy: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/H04271/>



At the end of October there was much excitement in the camp at the first snow fall of the year – the first ever to be seen by most of the boys in the Battalion.

By 18th November as the carnage of the Western Front accelerated and the call for reinforcements increased, movement orders were received. The idyllic life on Salisbury Plain was ended.

On 24 November Charles left Southampton with the Battalion and proceeded to France, crossing the Channel to Le Havre in a small ship which rocked and rolled a great deal. At 4am in the morning they were bundled into their rail transport which comprised cattle trucks, each accommodate 40 men or 8 horses. With the accommodation quite unbearable and the train achieving a speed of only three miles per hour many of the troops chose to put their packs on the train and walk alongside – jumping back on board when a downhill grade was encountered. The route was amazingly circuitous from Le Havre east to Rouen, north to Abbeville, Boulogne and Calais, east again to Hazebrouck and finally Bailleul. It was night when they arrived and their first sense of the Front was the distant glow of the “Verey Lights” (flares) that illuminated No Man’s Land throughout the night.

They were here for a week with most of the time spent in physical training and instruction in bayonet fighting together with unannounced gas mask drills.

The next move was to Armentieres, a few miles to the south east. At this point it was considered a "quiet" sector of the line, where they gained their first experiences of trench warfare, conducting patrols into No Man's Land and minor raids on the German trenches opposite them during the winter months. Being close to the amenities of Armentieres, which included cinemas, shops, cafes and restaurants, meant that life was fairly comfortable when not actually in the frost and snow of the trenches.

Nevertheless being on the line meant that the boys were always susceptible to the spread of infection and communicable diseases. On 30 December 1916 Charles was admitted to the field hospital suffering from mumps, which was rife in the Battalion at that time and was transferred to hospital in St Omer (about 40km to the rear). His condition must have been serious as he was then transferred to the major British medical facility at Etaples on the French coast. He was then transferred on 18 January 1917 back to hospital in Arques, not far from St. Omar.

Charles rejoined 41st Battalion on 26 January 1917 with the 11th Infantry Brigade, 3rd Division which was on duty at the Armentieres front. The Battalion history reports that *“During the winter months when fighting along the whole front was practically stationary, the only infantry action which took place was in the form of raids on enemy trench systems, the object being to take prisoners or find out by other means what regiments were opposing us, what their intentions might be, and anything that would be of general interest for the Allied cause, besides disorganising the enemy locally and showing him that we were not hibernating but on the contrary were very much alive and active.”*

The report also states *“during all this period the weather was extremely cold. After heavy falls of snow and slight frost at the beginning of January, the actual freeze up commenced about the 18th of the month and lasted without a break until 11 February. That phenomenal winter proved terribly trying to the men in the trenches and it was marvellous how well most of them came through it.”* The Battalion was in and out of the line between January and March, it then moved to Le Bizet and a few weeks later moved on to Ploegteert Wood near Messines (about half way between Armentieres and Ypres) . This place would become home on and off for the several months as they alternated front line duty with respite behind the lines.

It was here, in early June 1917, that the division undertook its first major engagement of the war when it was committed to the fighting during the Battle of Messines. They had been resting in the picturesque village of Pont de Nieppe enjoying warm baths and washing their clothes.

The Divisional history records:

"It was on the night of 1st -2nd June that we left Pont de Nieppe behind us, and established ourselves in the subsidiary line at "Maison 1875" just south of Ploegsteert Wood." The next night they moved into opposition and the HQ was established at a location known as "Advanced Estaminet". This was a little trench humour as the term means café or bar in French. It also housed a First Aid Station. At this time Charles was attached to the Headquarters staff and would most likely have been regularly coming and going from this location, particularly traversing the many communication trenches that snaked across the landscape and were particular targets for "Fritz's artillery".



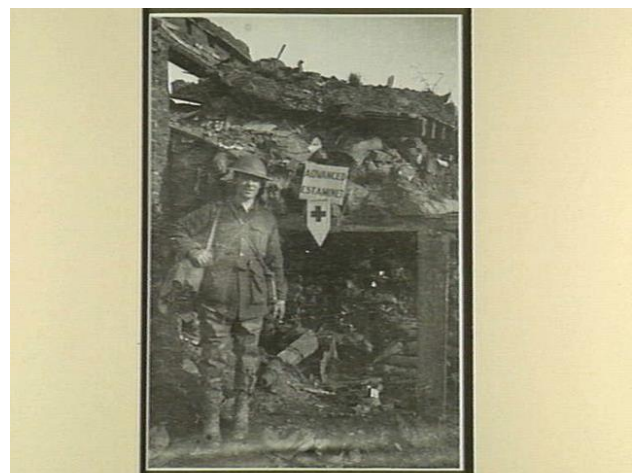
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Image of Advanced Estaminet.

"The Only Way, looking forwards FL [front line] taken near the Advanced Estaminet." 'Row of battle scarred trees on the horizon are lining the main road from Ploegsteert to Messines,[Image courtesy Australian War Memorial]

[Private Lindsay Turner among the ruins of the First Aid Station at Advanced Estaminet. Image courtesy Australian War Memorial]



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The Divisional history continues:

*"On 3rd June the artillery began preliminary bombardment for the Battle of Messines, and drew heavy retaliation on us, which played havoc with our trenches and C.T.'s (communication trenches), and cost us more than twenty casualties a day. This period before the battle is remarkable for the intense artillery barrages we had continuously to endure, which kept us, when we were not crouching behind our parapets, repairing the damage done to our defences. Much could be said of the spirit of the officers and men that stood this strain."*²

It was during this bombardment on 3 June 1917 that Charles was killed. He was 28 years of age. His formal military record does not provide any further details as to the circumstances, but a letter from his C.O. survives as reported in the local hometown newspaper.

The article reads "Mrs. R. J. Merlehan, Boonah, has received the following letter from Captain R. McIlroy concerning the death of her son in the battle of Messines:-

" I am writing this letter to let you know how deeply I regret the death of your son, No. 131, Private C. H. Merlehan. Your son was a member of the company I have the honour to command, and as he was a member of my headquarters staff he came daily under my notice. He gave every satisfaction, being a cool man under fire, and devoted to his duties. For many months he was actively engaged against the enemy, and at the time of his death was participating in the greatest battle in history. Your son was killed by an H.E.59 (high explosive) shell. His death was instantaneous. He died a hero, respected by all who came in contact with him. I deeply deplore his loss, and extend to you my heartiest sympathy in the loss of a brave son, who is a great loss to the nation."

Charles's personal effects were few and included a pipe and its cleaning gear, a razor, some postcards, a religious medal and rosary and a pocket book. These were returned to his mother. His pack contained a few other "comforts" sent to him by his family. Correspondence from Major Osborne, officer in charge of base records, writing to inform the family of the arrangements, advised that according to the practice of the Battalion, these are "*distributed to his immediate comrades. This will, no doubt, meet with your approval.*" His mother Margaret as next of kin was granted compensation for his death comprising a stipend of one pound per fortnight commencing 14th August 1917.

² Acknowledgement is gratefully extended to the authors and publishers of the 41st Division history compiled by the members of the Division's Intelligence Staff and published by the Imperial War Museum London.

Charles is buried in the Strand military cemetery, Comines-Warneton, Hainaut, Belgium. The cemetery is 13 km south of Ieper (Ypres) town centre on the Rejselseweg N365 road, which connects Ieper to Wijtschate, Mesen and on to Armentieres. The cemetery lies on the N365, 4 kilometres beyond Mesen and immediately before the village of Ploegsteert on the left-hand side of the road. Landmarks as you travel south from Mesen on the Armentieres road include The Irish Peace Park and Ploegsteert Memorial to the Missing. The Strand cemetery is just a little further on and is unprepossessing but is in a picturesque rural setting enclosed behind a stone fence.

At the gate to the cemetery there is a niche that contains a register book of the grave sites. As you stand in the gateway Charles's grave is several rows back and over to the left.



I visited that cemetery in 2009 on a day trip to Belgium with my wife Trish, daughter Katie and son-in-law Greg. It was growing late in the day when we found the site.

The graves were covered with a light layer of snow and under a rising full moon a red rose was flowering beside Charles's headstone.



HIS NAME LIVETH FOREVER