



**Private Michael Byrne (Number 474) of the 29<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Australian Imperial Force, lies in Bancourt British Cemetery – Grave reference VII.F.16.**

***(Right: The image of the Australian Army General Service Badge – there apparently were no distinctive regimental badges issued to Australian units – is from the Australian War Memorial web-site.)***



**Michael Byrne had apparently been on board ship in Melbourne Harbour in June of 1915 when he took it upon himself to enlist in the Australian Forces. He did so – *for the duration of the War & 4 mths* - and also attested on July 17 – the same file also has August 12 as being the date.**

**(continued)**

Posted to the *Brookmeadows Training Camp* in the outskirts of the city of Melbourne, Private Byrne was subsequently attached to 'B' Company of the 29<sup>th</sup> Battalion, a newly-formed unit from the Australian state of Victoria, on October 14, some nine weeks later.

Weeks later again, after a further period of training, the unit was assigned to the 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade, the 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade later becoming a part of the Australian 5<sup>th</sup> Division once having arrived in Egypt.

At about that same time in November of 1915, the 29<sup>th</sup> Battalion took passage for Egypt on board His Majesty's Australian Transport *Ascanius*.



(Right: *HMAT Ascanius* – The caption reads: *Departure of South Australian Infantry of the First Australian Expeditionary Force from Outer Harbour SA. 20<sup>th</sup> October 1914.* – image from *Old Ship Picture Galleries*)

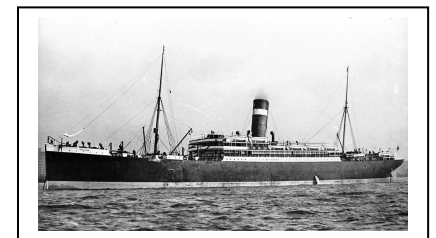
By the time that *Ascanius* docked in Egypt, at Port Suez – at the southern end of the Canal of the same name - on December 7, the British had already decided to abandon the Gallipoli adventure\*: thus the 29<sup>th</sup> Battalion and Private Byrne were not to see action in the Middle East. The unit, however, was to remain in Egypt for the six succeeding months, there to act in a defensive role in the event of a Turkish attack in the vicinity of the Suez Canal.



*\*During the Great War it was the British High Command which was in control of all the military forces of the British Empire (Commonwealth).*

(Right above: *Anzac Cove - where the Anzacs (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) were put ashore at Gallipoli on April 25, 1915 – seen here almost a century after the landing – photograph from 2011*)

Having embarked in Alexandria on June 14 onto His Majesty's Transport *Tunisian*, the 29<sup>th</sup> Battalion then landed in the French port-city of Marseilles some nine days later, on June 23. From there the unit was entrained to the northern French community of Hazebrouk where it was subjected to two additional weeks of training.



(Right above: *The image of Tunisian is also from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

(Right: *the northern French provincial town of Hazebrouck perhaps some ten years after the conflict but likely little unchanged: it was little damaged during the Great War, being a fair distance behind the lines.* – from a vintage postcard)



After those two weeks of training, the Australians of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division – and thus Private Byrne and his 29<sup>th</sup> Battalion – were moved into front-line positions just south of the Franco-Belgian border and the town of Armentières where it was to fight its first major action at Fromelles\* on July 19. There it replaced other troops which had been ordered south to fight in the maelstrom of *the Somme*.

*\*A large grave of Australians, by the time of writing, had recently been uncovered at Fromelles. They were likely buried by the Germans – as many still retained their identity discs – after the fierce fighting in the area; there is no suggestion of the burial having been anything other than a final courtesy by one side to the fallen of the other.*

Private Byrne was reported as having been wounded in the lip on September 27, likely while his unit was returning to the front-line trenches near Houplines, a relief that was carried out on the following day.

The wounded soldier in the meantime was admitted for treatment into the 15<sup>th</sup> Australian Field Ambulance – one of the five-hundred fifteen casualties treated there during that month - before being transferred on that same day to the Divisional Rest Station. There he was to remain for some two weeks before being discharged *to duty* to his unit, reportedly on October 19.

If the above is indeed the correct date of Private Byrne's return, then he was to travel south to seek out the 29<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Two days previously, on October 17, the unit had entrained in Bailleul, on its way to Longpré – full name Longpré-les-Corps-Saints – near Abbéville, from where it had marched in full kit to the community of Bussus. As this was where the Australians remained for the next three days, it was surely here that Private Byrne re-joined his comrades-in-arms.

By this time, on July 1, some thirteen weeks previous to Private Byrne's return to active service, twenty-seven Divisions of the British Army had launched in co-operation with its French allies the offensive of that summer – and as it transpired, much of the autumn as well - in the region of the valley of the River Somme whose name both the area and the battle bear.



These troops were all from the British Isles except for two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so heavily on that day at Beaumont-Hamel.



Many more troops were to fight and to die there and a goodly number was to come from all the independent Dominions of the British Empire (*Commonwealth*).

(Right above and right above: *Some of the remnants of the village of Pozières as it was after the Great War, in 1919 – and as it is a century later. The Australian War Memorial (Somme) may be seen in both images. – colour photograph from 2016*)

October 20 saw Private Byrne's unit marching before being transferred in motor lorries (*trucks*) as far as Buire-sur-Ancre where it was billeted for the night. On the following day the Battalion marched closer to *the Somme* front, to Mametz Wood where it was to remain until the next day. After the battles of the previous months, the wood was more like a moon-scape, and the Australians were to find very little shelter on what was to be a cold and rainy night.

On the following morning, 'A' and 'B' Company – the latter in which served Private Byrne – were ordered... *forward into front line in front of Flers*. This was the area where the Newfoundland Regiment, ten days earlier, from the nearby remnants of the village of Gueudecourt, had attacked the German lines and for a second time\* had again lost heavily for little gain – some of the dead of that October 12 apparently still lying unburied in *No Man's Land*.

*\*The first occasion had been, of course, at the Commune of Beaumont-Hamel on July 1, the first day of the Somme.*

(Right: *An aerial photograph of troops at the Somme moving up towards the front-line trenches at some time during the autumn of 1916 – from Illustration*)



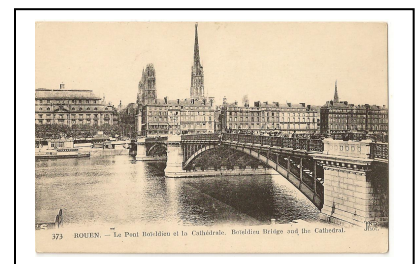
Having been relieved from front-line duty on November 4, by the 10<sup>th</sup> day of that month the Australians had marched to the rear as far as the community of Vignacourt. It was then and there that Private Byrne was sent to the 39<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearing Station at Allonville, to the north-east of the city of Amiens, being admitted on the morrow: on this occasion the problem was a skin complaint: psoriasis.



(Right above: *A photograph of Vignacourt at the time of the Great War – by courtesy of the Australian War Memorial*)

From there he was soon forwarded to the city of Rouen, the chief administrative centre in France for the British Expeditionary Force. There Private Byrne was transferred on November 14 into the 3<sup>rd</sup> Stationary Hospital for further care.

(Right: *The River Seine flows through the French city of Rouen and under the watchful gaze of its venerable gothic cathedral at or about the period of the Great War. – from a vintage post-card*)



Two days later again, on the 16<sup>th</sup>, Private Byrne was released to the 2<sup>nd</sup>(?) Convalescent Depot, also in the area of Rouen, from where he was ordered to – and *marched* to - the 5<sup>th</sup> Australian Divisional Base Depot at Étapes on December 4.

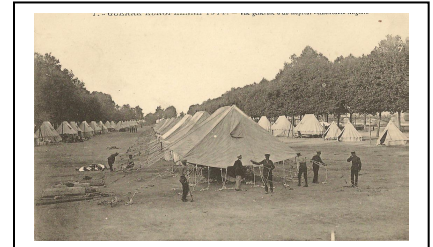
(continued)

Apparently, neither Private Byrne's marching nor his hospitalization was at an end: he was transferred from the Base Depot into the 26<sup>th</sup> General Hospital at Étapes - the reason apparently undocumented - on either the 16<sup>th</sup> or the 17<sup>th</sup> before then being discharged, according to his personal files, to march back to his unit on December 28.

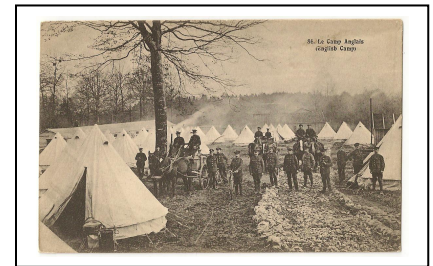
He was reportedly there on the morrow\*.

*\*While this is what is entered in his files, the distance by road to Dernancourt – which is where the 29<sup>th</sup> Battalion is documented as being on those dates – from Étapes is more than one hundred kilometres.*

Private Byrne was to serve with his unit on this occasion for only a little over a week before he was once more admitted into medical care, to the 39<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearing Station at Allonville: he had contracted a case of mumps.



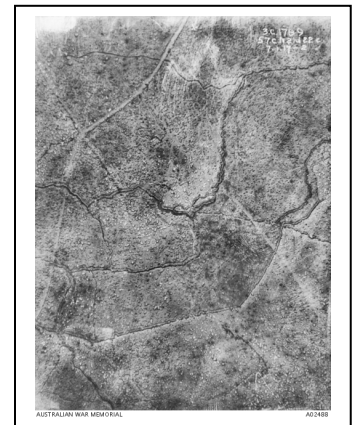
On the following day he was transferred into the 25<sup>th</sup> Stationary Hospital back in Rouen. Two weeks later again, on January 20, he was once more at an unspecified convalescent depot before being sent once more to the 5<sup>th</sup> Divisional Base Depot a week afterwards, on the 27<sup>th</sup>.



*(Right above: a British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and when the necessity arose – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War – from a vintage post-card)*

*(Right above: a typical British Army Camp during a winter period somewhere in France – from a vintage post-card)*

His documents appear to have him leaving the Base Depot on that same day, more than likely one of a re-enforcement draft, to march back to his unit *in the field* where he finally reported to duty on February 14. Most of the personnel of the 29<sup>th</sup> Battalion were at the time encamped out of the lines at Trônes Wood.



The Australians were to remain in that area until February 24 when they began to return to the forward area; on the 27 they were once more in the front-line trenches, and again in the area of Gueudecourt.

*(Right above: An aerial view on the German-held Sunray and Storm Trenches, a photograph taken on January 7, 1917 – by courtesy of the Australian War Museum)*

On March 2, at four o'clock in the morning, elements of the 29<sup>th</sup> Battalion attacked... *in an attack to take Sunray Trench from the 8<sup>th</sup> Bavarian Regiment.* Some success was apparently achieved as the Germans then counter-attacked only two hours later, an assault apparently repulsed with reportedly heavy enemy losses.

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As was the norm, the success of that and of the two succeeding days was measured in yards, the Battalion War Diarist apparently not having recorded the cost to the Australian unit on this occasion.



(Right: *The Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux: there are also several Newfoundlanders who served in Canadian uniform buried in the cemetery. – photograph from 2014*)

The son of John William Byrne and Elizabeth Byrne, of Riverhead, Harbour Grace, he was reportedly one of five siblings.

*\*There appears to be no trace of the family in available documentation – his father was perhaps a fisherman who latterly lived in the area of Otterbury, in the western outskirts of Harbour Grace. Two brothers may have been Edward and Patrick.*

Private Byrne was reported to have been *killed in action* on that March 2, 1917; he died at the age of twenty-four years.

The photograph of Private Michael Byrne (on the left) is from the Grand Banks Genealogy site to which it has been donated by John Michael Byrne.



Private Michael Byrne was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to [criceadam@yahoo.ca](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – February 17, 2023.