



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E00833

The Mud of 1917

## Roseworthy Agricultural College: Tales from the Honour Roll

### Eric Stodden West RDA

Eric almost did not survive his war. In April 1917, during the battle of Bullecourt he was wounded three times in the space of several hours. In a letter to his father he said, "After getting about a chain, I was shot through the thigh .... Our first line was along the railway embankment. By the time I reached it, I could hardly drag one foot after the other. I made my way to the dressing station and had my thigh bandaged". Stretcher-bearers took Private West to another dressing station. Here our Doctor looked at my wounds and gave me my ticket and I was left outside for some time on a stretcher". It began to snow.

Eric survived the war and went on to do a Master of Science degree at the University of California and then became the officer in-charge of the Commonwealth (later CSIRO) Research Station, Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area 1927 – 1939

We know all this detail as Eric wrote often to his father in Adelaide and parts of these letters are quoted in Les Carlyon's epic book *"The Great War"*. This book won the Prime Minister's Prize for Australian History in 2008. In preparing to write his book, Les travelled the battle field around NW France with Eric's two sons, who showed him the letters.

From our Roseworthy archives it can be seen Eric West attended RAC 1914 to 1915. He had enlisted at the age of 19 in May 1915 and on his Attestation form he listed his trade/ calling as "farmer". He had spent 3 years as a cadet, 79<sup>th</sup> Battalion, a militia battalion in Adelaide. A digital copy of his service records can be found by visiting the National Archives of Australia web site and search Private ES West with the service number 2262.

Not much mention is made of Eric West in our archives, notably in the "Student Magazines" 1914 -1918. At Roseworthy he was one of a small group of third year students who in mid 1916 had already enlisted. Their principal, Dr W J Colebatch allowed them to sit for their final exams early. Eric came from Rose Park, living in Hewitt Avenue

and listed his mother Emily West as his next of kin. He embarked with the 4<sup>th</sup> Reinforcement company of the newly formed 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion AIF, on the HMAT A70 Ballarat at Outer Harbour on 12<sup>th</sup> August 1916, arriving in England 30/9/1917, joining the 12<sup>th</sup> Training Battalion at Godford near Birmingham

He spent a total of 1 year 227 days overseas, of which only 103 were spent in France. 61 of these days were “on strength” with the 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion AIF, a famous South Australian WW1 battalion formed in 1916 from two other SA Battalions 10<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>. They were part of the new 5<sup>th</sup> AIF Division, formed from a mixture of fresh reinforcements and older hands from these two Gallipoli battalions. Eric had spent a lot of time in training in England and France, but was wounded in his first engagement with the enemy.

The battle of Bullecourt in the spring of 1917 soon after the winter thaw was a continuation of the strategy General Haigh had employed to disastrous effect in 1916. Then he launched the first British offensive in the Somme River Valley on 1 July 1916, which in less than half an hour had degenerated into chaos. The main dictum of British battle tactics of the time was always to attack. Perhaps this is why the British and Commonwealth forces never constructed the hugely impressive defensive structures that the Germans did, epitomised by the Hindenburg Line, with its concrete bunkers and five lines of defensive structures. Perhaps the British thought that as they were always to be on the offensive, building such structures was a waste of time and resources.

At 5.15 am on 11 April Eric found himself and the rest of his 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion heading for the Hindenburg Line, near the village of Bullecourt. Most of the promised British tanks had failed to arrive. This was the first time tanks had been employed in battle and they became part of the bloody fiasco that the Battle of Bullecourt turned out to be. The 4<sup>th</sup> Division AIF suffered more than 3000 casualties, including 1170 taken prisoner. Eric made the first line of German trenches, when he was hit by a hot metal fragment, causing a burning pain in his stomach. Soon afterward he was hit in his left arm. A fellow soldier pulled him into a sap between the German first and second lines of trenches, where he lay for an hour with his helmet on his face protecting him from the flying mud from the mortars shells and rifle grenades. As his comrades started to fall back he feared being left behind so staggered the almost 1.0 Km to his own lines. After about 20 metres he was shot through the thigh. It was a miracle he survived. On 25<sup>th</sup> May he was sent back to England from France and admitted to the 1<sup>st</sup> Southern General Hospital where he spent 142 days recovering from his wounds.

He returned to Adelaide on 24 October 1917 and was discharged at Keswick on 27 December, with a £1/10/- pension, with his papers marked “permanently unfit for general and home service. On his “Non Effective Statement” discharge form to the Chief Paymaster” the sections in the form entitled “Forfeitures, Crimes, VD etc. and Promotions Promotion, Appointments, Reversions were both marked NIL. This indicated to the pay master he neither had to add or deduct Eric any pay on discharge and he had committed no major crimes or sins during his service with the AIF nor had he risen in the ranks. A typical but sad epitaph to his 1 year and 227 days of service to Australia. However Eric, as many of his fellow soldiers did in those days, moved on. For him an even greater period of service to his country ensued, in citrus and irrigation research at Griffith as OIC Commonwealth Research Station, Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area. His letters to his father stand as a far more worthy testament to his war service, than his rather “matter of fact” service records held by the Australian National Archives. Eric’s story in Les Carlyon’s book is only one of many personal accounts contained amongst the facts, figures, strategies adopted by the leaders that conducted that terrible war.

1917 was the worst year for the AIF in terms of casualties. Recruiting was slowing after Fromelles and Pozieres during the summer offensives of 1916. As a result, the Prime Minister Billy Hughes held the first conscription referendum on 28 Oct 1916, in which Australia voted NO (National 1,087,557 NO (48.4%) and 1,160,033 YES – with South Australia voting 119,236 NO (56.6%) and 87924 YES. A second referendum failed by an even larger number on 20 December 1917. In both referendums the troops in the field voted for conscription by a significant amount. There were very keen for more help from home.

According to an AWM key events article in 1917 following Bullecourt the Australians fought costly but successful actions at Mennin Road (20 September), Polygon Wood (26 September) and Broodseinde Ridge (4 October), all of which were well supported by Artillery in concert with the attacking infantry. This was further developed by General Monash in 1918 as the commander of the Anzac Corps. However 1917 ended in disaster for the Australians and all British and Commonwealth forces in the Battle for Passchendaele (Third Battle of Ypres) which commenced in the

mud of Flanders fields on 12 October. Australian efforts to capture Passchendaele failed dismally with over 38,000 casualties, overall allied casualties being 275,000 including 70,000 killed.

I will be attending a commemorative service this year in NW France on 26<sup>th</sup> September to mark these tragic events, which saw many of our Roseworthy students of a hundred years ago lose their lives or return home as casualties. In many ways we are all casualties of war. I hope to walk the fields where Eric and his fellow Roseworthians fought.

Dick (RK) Turnbull RDA 1966-1968

Adelaide

29 August 2017