

# SOLDIERS OF WORLD WAR I – THE GREAT WAR

## FROM EMU PARK and SHIRE OF LIVINGSTONE

### **Lance Corporal Alexander Murdoch Edmestone (Service No. 91) of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Battalion**

Alexander Murdoch Edmestone was born on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1897 at Flemington near Glasgow, Scotland, 1st child to Alexander Edmestone, a dairy farmer at Etna Creek and his wife Jane (née Murdoch), who arrived in Australia in 1908 from Scotland. Alexander (Junior) was a stockman working on their Etna Creek station when he joined the AIF on the 6<sup>th</sup> December 1915 at the age of nineteen and became a member of ‘A’ Company, 42<sup>nd</sup> Battalion which formed part of 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Division.

The 42<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Battalion consisted on average of 29 Officers and 1007 Other Ranks (OR’s) and was broken up into the following sub units:

Section	Platoon	Company	Battalion
Rifle section:- 10 OR’s	Platoon Headquarters (1 Officer & 3 OR’s)	Company Headquarters (2 Officers & 6 OR’s)	Battalion Headquarters (5 Officers & 75 OR’s)
Lewis Gun Section:- 10 OR’s and 1 Light Machine Gun	3 Rifle Sections and 1 Lewis gun Section	4 Platoons	4 Companies

Alexander was transported to England on HMAT A30 Borda on the 5<sup>th</sup> June 1916, then later in the year to *Armentiers* in France near the Belgium boarder. It took three days before the first casualty occurred, Sergeant Hannah died during an enemy artillery bombardment. Christmas Day 1916 was spent in the front line trenches. Before moving off to the trenches, he was issued with gum boots from the Gumboot Store, but the boots accumulated as much moisture inside as they were designed to keep out. Alongside of the Gumboot Store was a Young Mens Christian Association (YMCA) canteen, where tea and biscuits could be obtained prior to entering the trenches. If Private Edmestone was not in the trenches, he would be part of a working party to perform trench digging, laying cables and barb wire or carrying equipment and supplies to the front line. Raiding parties were also formed in which up to 70 men would make their way over to the enemy trenches to examine the state of the lines, support activities and capture the occasional prisoner. On a lighter note, he would participate in the bath parades, where groups of 8 to 12 men shared a bath in large beer vats or had his uniforms fumigated and seams ironed to kill the ‘chats’ (lice) and their eggs.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Photo of members of the 42nd Battalion washing their gum boots outside the gum boot store. Identified are: 91 Private (Pte) Alexander M Edmestone (left, standing behind pole); Corporal D Miller (left foreground, washing his boots in the bucket); Pte J Bellidge (next to Miller); Sergeant J Trapp (extreme right sitting down).

Around Armentieres, the usual trench warfare continued, casualties occurred daily, whilst the weather was exceedingly rigorous; in fact, it was the coldest winter known in these parts for many years past. Battalion trenches were subjected to intense bombardment by Minenwerfer and high explosive shells, resulting in casualties. The Minenwerfer (nick named "Minnie") was one of the deadliest of trench-mortar bombs used against the allies which exploded with a deafening noise and the concussion was nerve wracking. They were so large that it was possible to trace their progress through the air, although in the final descent their course was erratic. At night they appeared like large blood-red sticks in the sky. Part and parcel of everyday life in the trenches was the enemy raiding parties and the threat of gas attacks.

The first major battle Pte Edmestone was involved in was the *Battle of Messines* from 7<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> June 1917. The main battle raged for three days in which they were victorious but at a cost of 185 out of 1011 men in the battalion.

The *Battle of Messines* was fought to prepare the ground for the much more strategically important battle of Passchendaele later in the year. The battle had one purpose, to clear the Germans from the high ground that overlooked parts of the future battleground. Consequently, the Messines battle had limited objectives, only a short distance from the starting point, which enabled the British artillery to provide effective and uninterrupted support during the attack. The battle was fought by the British General Sir Herbert Plumer's Second Army, of which II Anzac Corps, including the 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Division, was a part (in addition, the 4<sup>th</sup> Australian Division was sent as reinforcements later in the battle). Plumer is generally regarded as one of the more able British generals and he was a master of the set piece battle. A heavy preliminary artillery bombardment of the German lines preceded the attack which consisted of 2,300 field guns and 300 heavy mortars.

The Australians were responsible for the southern part of the attack. To their left, the New Zealanders were responsible for the capture of Messines village itself. To the New Zealanders' north, the Irish capture the ridgeline between Wytschaete and Messines.

The initial assault was preceded by the detonation of 19 mines under the German front line which caused an estimated 10,000 German casualties. At Hill 60, the 1st Australian Tunnelling Company had been at work since November 1916 digging two large mineshafts under Hill 60 and The Caterpillar. The Hill 60 mine created a crater 80 meter wide and 18 meters deep. British, Australian and New Zealand infantry advanced behind a carefully coordinated artillery bombardment and took all their objectives within the first hours of the battle. Later that afternoon, when the reserve elements of the attack were advancing down the forward slope of Messines Ridge to the next objective (German Oostaverne Line), they were subjected to an intense German barrage. The attacking troops, by now including the Australian 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Division, successfully repelled several heavy enemy counter-attacks. At midnight on 8th June, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Battalion took over the part of the new front line. It was their task to strongly consolidate the line, hence for the next five days they dug and strengthened the defences to withstand any counter-attacks. Their position was so advanced, that Messines, once a prosperous town, now only just a heap of ruins was lying far away to the rear. During this period, several counter-attacks were repulsed and were subjected to intense bombardments. The stench from the tremendous number of Germans lying unburied in front of them was nauseating.

By 15<sup>th</sup> June 1917, the allies had cleared all the objectives and the high ground south of Ypres was in British hands. The first requirement of the forthcoming battle of Passchendaele had been met.

Australian casualties were heavy for the battle of Messines. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division suffered 500 casualties even before the attack started, when a German phosgene gas attack struck the troops advancing through Ploegsteert Wood to the start line. In addition, shrapnel fire in the woods inflicted further heavy casualties. In all, the Australians suffered 6800 casualties, two thirds of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. Alexander's battalion casualties mounted to 209 personnel.

They were relieved in the Messines sector on 11<sup>th</sup> July by the 36<sup>th</sup> attalion and moved into tents and shelters by the side of a small streamlet called *Le Petit Douve* to prepare for the *attack on Warneton*.

The *attack on Warneton* (31<sup>st</sup> July 1917) was the first action for the 42<sup>nd</sup> battalion in the *Third Battle of Ypres* (also known as the battle of Passchendaele which consisted of several battles). The attacks main objective was to eliminate the enemy's strong posts established in No-man's Land, but was also devised to serve as a diversion for the offensive taking place on the North-west (Belgium) Front. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division attacked with two battalions, the 42<sup>nd</sup> and 43<sup>rd</sup> on a front of 1,300 yards. The German outposts were only 100 yards distance in the centre. When the advance began the 42<sup>nd</sup> and 43<sup>rd</sup> were upon the enemy almost immediately. Within a quarter of an hour the first wave had gone on, and was lying along the wire of the Warneton Line, and the second wave was digging outposts and the third wave was busy in the new front line trench. At dusk, when the tired 42<sup>nd</sup> and 43<sup>rd</sup> were about to be relieved by the 41<sup>st</sup> the bombardment became intense. The German's counter-attacked, but were kept away from most of the outposts. Casualties for the battalion were 40 killed and 150 wounded.

Most of August 1917 was spent at the Waterlands Camp near *Steenwerke*. This camp was generally known as Jesus Farm, probably so named from the Crucifix which stood at the roadside. Owing to many of the allies observation balloons flying in the sky above this

location, the camp received a great deal of shrapnel intended for the Balloons. The troops were frequently spectators of thrilling escapes by the observers when the balloons they occupied were set on fire by enemy ground artillery or planes.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> August 1917, Private Edmestone was promoted to Lance Corporal.

The battalion's tenancy of Jesus Farm expired on 22<sup>nd</sup> August, when they marched to the village of *Remilly-Werquin* and were billeted in barns. It is recorded that the battalion had quite a pleasant stay there until 26<sup>th</sup> September when they were ordered to march to *Poperinghe*. This two day march was very trying due to the heat and dust. The camp was bombarded at a steady rate throughout the next four days which inflicted heavy casualties.

The 42<sup>nd</sup> battalion's strength at the end of September was 43 officers, 978 other ranks. On 2<sup>nd</sup> October they marched to Ypres. Reaching there, we bivouacked at a location near a cemetery a little after midday in preparation for the *Battle of Broodseinde* (also named the Battle of Zonnebeke).

At 10 p.m. on the night of 3<sup>rd</sup> October the approach march began. The marching was very difficult owing to the several showers which had rendered the ground sodden and sticky and made visibility very poor. The assembly point was near the Zonnebeke Railway Station. On 4<sup>th</sup> October, the artillery commenced laying down a heavy barrage, which moved forward about 300 yards. The enemy retaliated with heavy artillery fire, which caused many losses among the men who were in the rear sections. At 6 a.m. the artillery came down on the enemy lines with ferocity and accuracy. Simultaneously, the whole Brigade rose as one man and went forward on the attack.

A great number of enemy dead were found shortly after, making it evident this line had been very heavily held. The 43<sup>rd</sup> Battalion reached its objective without difficulty. The 42<sup>nd</sup> advanced behind the 43<sup>rd</sup> and reached its first objective by 6.20 a.m. and consolidation was commenced immediately. At forty-one minutes after zero hour, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Battalion leap-frogged through the 43<sup>rd</sup>, and continued the attack.

Owing to the swampy ground and heavy travelling, the company of the Battalion operating on our left failed to keep up with the barrage, and this drew our left company about 500 metres over to the left. This was remedied by the Commander of our A Company (Alexander's company), which was in reserve, who acted promptly by moving 500 metres to cover a gap in the left flank. Heavy enemy artillery bombardment continued in an attempt to stop 'A' company from achieving their objective. The left flank was secured and the Brigade advanced over wet and shell torn ground to finally reach cover after two hours of hell. The enemy made repeated counter-attacks, but all were repelled.

The brigade's objective was reached on time and consolidation was very arduous due to the very wet and shell torn ground. The artillery barrage halted 200 yards beyond the designated location for forty-seven minutes. Large numbers of prisoners started to move towards the new lines; altogether one hundred of them were taken by the 42<sup>nd</sup> alone.

The Germans made repeated counter-attacks for several days. The 42<sup>nd</sup> was relieved from the new front line on the morning of 6<sup>th</sup> October after having been in the line continuously for sixty hours. The battalion's casualties were 231 killed and wounded. After a day march, the

42<sup>nd</sup> were rested at St. Lawrence Camp, *Brandhoek*. The roads and ground were in a deplorable condition. Battalion strength was 32 officers, 773 other ranks.

On the morning of 10<sup>th</sup> October, Alexander was preparing for the *Battle of Passchendaele Ridge*, when he blacked out and collapsed. He remembered nothing until he gain conscience in a casualty clearance station. After a medical examination, he was diagnosed with fatigue which caused further complications. He was moved to several hospitals in England but was back in action by 27<sup>th</sup> August 1918 when he was transferred to the 4<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Company (4<sup>th</sup> M.G.Coy) which was attached to the AIF's 4<sup>th</sup> Division commanded by the Australian General John Monash.

The 4<sup>th</sup> M.G.Coy was camped near the village of *Longueau* in the rest area. The daily routine was marching/infantry drills, firing range practice and in the afternoon, games of Australian Rules football. Orders came through on the 6<sup>th</sup> September to move to Catelet by the 10<sup>th</sup> September. During the march to Catelet, the countryside showed the rapidity of the German retreat. Villages were practically undamaged by the war where normally they would be in ruins which illustrates the power of the artillery. The 4<sup>th</sup> M.G.Coy moved forward to the Divisional Reserve line on 12<sup>th</sup> September at *Santin Farm* in preparation for the *Battle of Epéhy*.

The 4<sup>th</sup> M.G.Coy were distributed amongst the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade Battalions by the following:

No. 1 Section to the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion,

No.2 Section to the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion,

No.3 Section to the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion, and

No. 4 Section as reserve but later support to the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

For this battle, each machine gun section was issued with 4 machine guns and tripods, 10 boxes of ammunition, 4 pack horses, 1 petrol tin of water, a 1<sup>st</sup> aid case full of spares parts, oil and rages along with 2 soldiers to act as runners for communication purposes.

The attack on the Epéhy area was an overall allies attempt to breach the German Hindenburg Line and the objective consisted of a fortified zone roughly 32 km long and 4.8 km deep, supported by subsidiary trenches and strong points. With very few tanks available for the attack, artillery was relied upon to prepare the way but in the interests of surprise they would not be able to provide a preliminary bombardment. The 1,488 guns would instead fire concentration shots at zero hour and support the infantry with a creeping barrage and 300 machine-guns were also made available. All three corps of the Fourth Army were to take part, with V Corps of the Third Army on their left flank and on their right the French First Army.

On 18<sup>th</sup> September at 5.20 a.m., the attack opened with 1,488 guns providing the initial bombardment and a creeping barrage for the advancing troops. The promised French assistance did not arrive, resulting in limited success for IX Corps on that flank. On the left flank, III Corps also found difficulty when attacking the fortifications at "the Knoll", Quennemont and Guillemont farms, which were held determinedly by German troops. The village was however captured by the British 12th Eastern Division. In the centre, General

John Monash's two Australian divisions achieved complete and dramatic success. The 1st Australian Division and the 4th Australian Division, had a strength of some 6,800 men and in the course of the day captured 4,243 prisoners, 76 guns, 300 machine-guns and 30 trench mortars. They took all their objectives and advanced to a distance of about 4.8 km on a 6.4 km front. The Australian casualties were 1,324 men (265 killed, 1,057 wounded, 2 captured). The battle saw the first mutiny of Australian forces, when 119 men of the 1st Australian Division refused to conduct an attack to help the neighbouring British unit. Rather than face charges of desertion in the face of the enemy, they were charged with being Absent Without Official Leave (AWOL - with all but one soldier having their charges dropped after the armistice). The attack closed as an Allied victory, with 11,750 prisoners and 100 guns captured.

During this battle, 4<sup>th</sup> M.G.Coy's *No. 1 Section* advanced with the 13<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion in the steady rain but soon after leaving the tapped lines, they suffered a hit from the allied guns which killed one horse and wounded two men. Mist and smoke made it difficult to maintain direction while the soggy ground, trench and barbed wire obstacles slowed down the packhorses. The infantry was advancing quickly, so 21 boxes of ammunition per gun were unloaded from the horses and carried by the section while the horses were left to follow at the rear. On reaching the edge of *Mill Spinney*, machine guns were positioned and fired 500 rounds at the enemy machine gun positions and snipers. At zero hour plus 3 hours 10 minutes, they advanced again with two more men wounded by our guns (a gun was two lifts behind the artillery creeping barrage). On reaching the next objective, gun positions were set up and 750 rounds fired to cover the advance of the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

*No. 2 Section* moved from *Jeancourt* at 3 p.m. and met no opposition until reaching *Ascension Valley* when enemy planes and machine guns fired on the section. No casualties were suffered. At 8 p.m., two machine guns were in position to protect the right flank with two machine guns allocated to each advancing 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion companies. The attack commenced at 11 p.m. and at 11.30 p.m. 1500 rounds were fired at the retreating enemy.

*No. 3 Section* advanced with the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the rain and heavy mist. Negotiating the trench and barbed wire obstacles, the section caught up with the infantry after an allied artillery shell exploded nearby causing wounds to three men and two horses. The section advanced again with the infantry which was impeded by the irregularity of the artillery creeping barrage. Setting up positions left of *Grand Priel Farm*, targets (enemy machine guns, transport lines and infantry) were obtained and silenced or disrupted. The section advancing again, then set up cross firing positions after reaching the final objective, in readiness for the German counter-attacks.

*No. 4 Section* advanced with the 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion and took up positions at *Ascension Farm* and *Hoof Point* and fired 1000 rounds at the retreating German army. They continued the advance again and on reaching the next objective, they came under heavy enemy artillery shelling and machine gun fire. On reaching their final objective, they set up positions in the trenches in readiness for the enemy counter-attack.

The British 46<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Regiment relieved the 4th M.G.Coy on 22<sup>nd</sup> September who then marched for four days to arrive at the rest area in *Le Mesge*. The 4<sup>th</sup> M.G.Coy stayed in this location until 17<sup>th</sup> November 1918.

Alexander was granted leave for Non Military Employment from 31<sup>st</sup> March to 30<sup>th</sup> June 1919 to further educate himself in stock breeding. He attended Mr W. Murdoch's farm in Muirhead, Lanarkshire, Scotland which is 11 km north east of Glasgow.

Lance Corporal Edmestone returned to Australia on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1919 onboard . Alexander resumed his work as stockman on the family cattle station at Craighoyle (Etna Creek) near Rockhampton. Alexander married Effie Muriel Jones (2nd youngest daughter of the late Mr. and Mrs A. G. Jones) on 13<sup>th</sup> September 1928 at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Rockhampton and spent their honeymoon at Emu Park.

After their marriage, Alexander (Alex) applied for the position of Postmaster at Baralaba which he attained in 1928. While in Baralaba, Alex and Effie's family of one girl and two boys, Jean, Bill and Tom, were born. In May 1934 the position of Postmaster at Emu Park became available and Alex was successful in his application, hence the family moved from Baralaba to Emu Park in May 1934. Alex was employed as the Postmaster until his death on 18th December 1955 and is buried in the Emu Park cemetery. He was the first secretary of the Emu Park R.S.L. Sub Branch and third president of same R.S.L. Sub Branch. Alex volunteered for service in the 2nd World War and was an Acting Sergeant in the 13th Battalion of the Volunteer Defence Corp (VDC) at Emu Park during the 2nd World War.



Photo of from L to R: Cecilia Ryan, Captain George Jolly, Frances Deasey and Lance Sergeant Alex Edmestone at Bell Park, Emu Park in the 1940's.

Other family members who serviced in WWI are Alexander's cousins, George Edmestone (Service No. 2012) of the 11th Light Horse Regiment and James Edmestone (Service No. 4694) of the 54th Infantry Battalion.



Photo of Private Alexander Murdoch Edmestone

Alexander Edmestone's medal entitlement: British War Medal, Victory Medal and Australian Service Medal 1938 - 1945.



Unit Colour Patch of 42<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Battalion and 4<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Company

