



My God it was terrible. Just slaughter. The 5th Div. were almost annihilated. We certainly gained our objectives but what a cost. Mates I have played with last night and joked with are now lying cold.

Sapper Leslie McKay, diary, 26 September 1917

Many people would be familiar with the above photograph. It epitomises all the horrendous carnage of the great and futile battles of the Western Front. This was once a beautiful rural scene – the sticks are remnants of trees that once stood in a quiet wood – now utterly destroyed by relentless barrages of artillery shells. The rain turned the disturbed soil into a dangerous sea of mud that had a tendency to swallow helpless men whole, never to be seen again.

“How awful that must have been” we say at the safe distance of 92 years, with no real understanding or acknowledgement. Five hundred and thirty two Australians lost their lives on the day this photograph was taken – a nice round figure, quite easy to say. However that represents a great deal of grief for 532 lost loves, potential never to be realised, never to love or be loved again. Many hopes and dreams were lost in that terrible sea of mud the day that photograph was taken – 26 September 1917.

I don't know very much about my father's family. My father and his brother served in the Army in World War II and somehow avoided being posted to Singapore just in time. My grandfather was a stockman, or jackeroo, from the back blocks of NSW and was a Lighthorseman in World War I. He returned from service in the Middle East and, like many returned servicemen, seemed to have lived the remainder of his life in the shadow of some of the horrors of war. I knew that his younger brother – Archie – disappeared

somewhere in France during one of the big battles. Again, quite easy to leave it at that, and it really is such a long time ago.

With the Unley trip to Belgium and France now approaching, I decided to research some of the history of the places we are to visit. I thought that it may be possible that my grand uncle Archie would be commemorated on the Menin Gate. This memorial has some 52000 names of men with no known grave.

One of the greatest battles of the Western Front in Belgium was fought by the Australian 5th Division only a few miles from Ypres. It was this battle that earned the 53rd Battalion its nickname – “The Glorious 53rd”. The Australian War Memorial’s website describes the famous “Battle of Polygon Wood” and continues:

Many of the Fifth Division who died at Polygon Wood have no known grave and they are commemorated on the Menin Gate. In Buttes New British Cemetery lie a few of those killed on 26 September 1917. Private Archibald Cameron, 53rd Battalion (New South Wales), aged 21, from Bogan Gate, New South Wales, was possibly caught by the German barrage which opened on the rear areas after the initial Australian advance. He was wounded badly in the head and advised to go back to a Regimental Aid Post and he was not seen by anyone in the battalion after that. Cameron lies buried in Plot XXX, Row A, Grave 10.

I almost couldn’t believe what I was reading. What are the odds of that? Of all the soldiers that could have been presented as an example, my grand uncle Archie scored a special mention! It was a strange coincidence to see this – almost as if Archie was calling to me down the years.

I know a lot more about Archie after reading his Service Record. I know that he enlisted in Parkes on 25 April 1916, and departed Australia on the trooper “Mashobra” on 14 September 1916, landing at Plymouth about six weeks later. He was sent to France as a 5th Division reinforcement, arriving in the Field on 29th December 1916. After undertaking a course in musketry, he was wounded at Bullecourt, suffered trench foot and spent two long spells in the field hospital, returning to his Battalion in July 1917.

Archie’s war record ends abruptly on 26 September 1917 – the same time and place as captured in the photo above. He was listed initially as “Wounded in Action”, then “Wounded and Missing in Action”. Finally, a military Court of Inquiry in the Field handed down the finding of “Killed in Action” on 3 April 1918. This was a long time to wait for his family to hear official news of his fate, and they had received conflicting information from other sources as to

his whereabouts. After the war a group of bodies were exhumed at Polygon Wood, and Archie was one of only 36 Australian casualties identified and laid to rest in a known grave. That's only 36 out of 532 of our boys.

The Service Record also provided enough information about Archie to paint a personal picture. He was a country boy from the little town of Bogan Gate where he had been working as a farm labourer. He was 5'4 (quite short for a Cameron), very fair in complexion with blue eyes and light brown hair. He was also of small build, his weight listed as 126 lbs. I couldn't help thinking that my own little boy will probably be very like this when he reaches the age of 20. I also learned that his mother had died at some point previously of a 'disease', and that he had no desire to make a will. Even at the age of 19, Archie had already experienced a few challenges in life and had worked hard for his keep. He also answered the call to fight "For King and Country" and had something of that wonderful indestructible optimism of those who are young with their life stretching out before them.



This is a famous painting depicting the Battle of Polygon Wood, and the 53rd Battalion in action.

The Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry Records for Archie still survive and serve to offer a little more information about him derived from his peers. The reports suggest that Archie was rather slight, short in stature, clean shaven, and very fair with a white patch at the front of his hair. He left his trench at 4:00 am on the morning of battle and had proceeded about 200 yards before being hit in the side of his cheek, wounding his eye badly. His mate Pte Jenkins saw him hit and told him to go back to the aid station for treatment in the company of another mate, L/Cpl Fookes. It is

reported that at about 6:00 am another infantryman saw Archie just as a shell landed very close to him. Archie was not seen again.

Imagine the horror of that situation – Archie received a wound to the head from a flying piece of metal, it was dark, he could see out of only one eye and was likely in great pain, the sights and sounds of a full on battle would have dazzled the senses, and through all this confusion of battle he had to find his way back for help. It gladdened my heart to know that he was looked after by his mates and that they stuck by him and helped him. I am glad his death was quick and that he did not have to suffer the slow and painful death suffered by so many – left to die alone and forgotten in some cold, frightening, and unknown place. He was only 21 years old.

Many of the Red Cross reports gave a further insight into Archie – he was called 'Baby Face' by his comrades. Another gave him a great Australian compliment: "He was well thought of by his mates."



Polygon Wood today

I look at that famous photograph of Polygon Wood and I think to myself: "he was *actually* there, on that *very day*." I know where he lies, just a few miles out of Ypres, amongst the woods that are again peaceful and quiet, no longer harbouring the horrors of war. I hope I will have the courage and strength to pay a respectful visit.

The Division's Glorious Dead! ... Of all those things of which the 5th Australian Division is proud, it is proudest of its Dead. Them it most reveres. The memory of them it cherishes above all things. May all Australian hearts be softened by their love, animated by their courage, ennobled and uplifted by their example until the end of time.

Captain Alexander Ellis, The Story of the Fifth Australian Division