

Although William Henry Clark was a bruised, scarred young man, he pulled his weight as a machine gunner in 4th Australian Machine Gun Company in major battles on the Western Front as well as being wounded then hospitalized in both France and England.

William, the eldest son of Alice Somers nee O'Keefe was born Somers but at baptism his father was named as John West Clark.¹ Born in 1894 in Lottah, a Tasmanian tin-mining town, at age 17 William was in trouble.² Over the next four years, he was in gaol three times for forgery, larceny and fighting. According to his gaol records, fingers on both right and left hand were scarred and the rest of his right arm and elbow were damaged. This may have been from mining at Lottah or farming accidents with his uncle.³

His enlistment records dated 14 June 1916 state that William was 5'8¼" tall and his chest measurement was 34½ to 38 inches.⁴ Maybe he enlisted as he thought he could use the six shillings per day earned as a private to pay off his debt to his uncle and father.

His younger brother Joseph enlisted in July. As both lived in an exempt area, they had no previous military training. At Claremont Camp near Hobart, they learned to march in a group, work in a team, live and work in trenches and to disassemble and reassemble rifles and bayonets. The brothers embarked on *HMAT Ulysses* from Melbourne on 25 October.⁵

¹ Findmypast, baptism William Henry Clark, St Helens, Tasmania, 28 Jan 1895, Australia, Births And Baptisms, 1792-1981, Accessed 10 May 2017.

² 'CURRENT TOPICS.', *Examiner (Launceston, Tas. : 1900 - 1954)*, 28 August 1912, p. 4.

³ Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office (TAHO), GD63/1/5, Gaol record, William Clark.

⁴ Service record of William Henry Clark, p.3, B2455, National Archives Australia (NAA)

⁵ Service record of William Henry Clark, p.4.



Figure 1: Ulysses A38 Oct 25th 1916, Port Melbourne boarding troops. **Source:** J E Barnes, photographer, postcard/print from Great Southern Card Publishers, Australia www.greatsoutherncards.com.au Accessed: 16 March 2017

Life on *Ulysses* involved boxing matches, concerts, sports carnivals and church parades as well as lifeboat drills as the voyage up the west coast of Africa could involve meeting German submarines. There was also time to meet locals when the troopship berthed for supplies.⁶

Arriving at Plymouth late December, William went to Perham Downs training camp. He arrived in the middle of an extremely cold winter. Many soldiers were hospitalized with pneumonia due to the constant marching then standing on parade.⁷ A newspaper article by Reg Biggs from the *Examiner* staff describes life on arrival in England and in the training camps on Salisbury Plains.⁸

William marched into the new machine gun training depot at Belton Park, Grantham in Lincolnshire on 3 January 1917. It was late in 1915 when the British realised the value of

⁶ 'Soldiers' Letters.', *Rochester Express (Vic. : 1914 - 1918)*, 17 November 1916, p. 3.

⁷ Roger Beckett, 'The Australian soldier in Britain, 1914–1918'. *Australians in Britain: The Twentieth-Century Experience*, edited by Bridge, Carl; Crawford, Robert; Dunstan, David. Melbourne: Monash University ePress, 2009, pp. 6.1 to 6.17.

⁸ 'WITH THE FORTIETH.', *Examiner (Launceston, Tas. : 1900 - 1954)*, 17 October 1916, p. 7.

Vickers machine guns and how they could be used as defensive fire power near the trenches and over No Man's Land.⁹ Both indirect fire and creeping barrages were used.

William was well suited as a member of a machine gun team. He was tall, strong and able to carry heavy loads.¹⁰ He had to be able to fire the Vickers machine gun accurately, keep it in good condition, work out range of fire, know his enemy's aircraft as well as soldering, welding and finally firing using gas masks.¹¹

Nine days after arrival at Grantham, William was sent to Lichfield hospital which specialised in the treatment of venereal diseases (VD). He was one of over 40,000 Australian soldiers who were treated for VD which included daily injections of heavy metals, douching, syringing and application of caustic substances on the genitals.¹²

William may have been bored with training and not fighting at the front line or had met his future wife (a nurse living near Grantham) but 22 May 1917 is the first of five AWLs or absences mentioned in his record. He was usually confined to barracks and forfeited a number of days pay.¹³ There was one court of inquiry held.¹⁴

On 3 July 1917, William headed to Etaples in France which was a base camp for the British, Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders. At one stage, over 100,000 people including soldiers, nurses and prisoners lived there. Excerpts from Elsie Tranter's diary show both positive and negative sides of living in a large camp.¹⁵

On 12 September William was taken on strength with the 4th Machine Gun Company at the front lines. Two weeks later, he received an accidental gunshot wound to the stomach. As this was not during military action, disciplinary action was noted for AJ Elliot but not William Clark.¹⁶

⁹ National Trust UK, Belton Remembers, Teacher's Resource Guide, <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/belton-house/documents/belton-remembers.pdf> p.4.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p.6.

¹¹ *ibid*, p.7.

¹² Secret WWI history of Australian soldiers with venereal disease, *Canberra Times*, 24 October 2014.

¹³ Service record of William Henry Clark, pp.4,6.

¹⁴ Service record of William Henry Clark, pp.30-35.

¹⁵ Through These Lines, <http://throughtheselines.com.au/research/etaples>, Accessed 8 April 2017.

¹⁶ Service record of William Henry Clark, p.5.

Soldiers would accidentally wound themselves but usually after they had seen action at the front line. If they were found guilty by court martial for a self inflicted wound (SIW), they could face a firing squad.¹⁷

The gunshot wound caused William to be admitted to hospitals in both France and England several times over the period of his war service. He was sent to a casualty clearing station then a general hospital before he embarked on *HMS Grantully Castle* where he spent time at a military hospital in Exeter, England. On 1 November, he was transferred to 3rd Australian Auxiliary Hospital at Dartford. Patients here were given 30 cigarettes per week from the Australian Red Cross Store at the hospital.¹⁸

After a two week furlough, William reported to Hurdcott where he was classified as B1a3 meaning he was fit for an overseas training camp in two to three weeks.¹⁹ By 7 December he was classified A3 and fit to be marched out to the Overseas Training Brigade at Deverell and Longbridge. These camps were to get the soldier back into a frame of mind ready for the front lines again. By the end of December he returned to Grantham before going AWL again for 22 days.

Reading the company war diaries for 1918, it was mentioned that there was much enemy activity in the air but the gunners had a lack of tracer ammunition so used what they had sparingly. Machine gunners usually sent over thousands of rounds just as the enemy troops were being relieved.²⁰

For the remainder of his service, William was on the front lines at Hessian Wood, Hebuterne, Villers-Bretonneux and Monument Wood where many artillery shells were falling short of

¹⁷ Spartacus Educational, "Blighty Wounds", <http://spartacus-educational.com/FWWblighty.htm>, Accessed 11 May 2017

¹⁸ Lost Hospitals of London, "Orchard hospital", <http://ezitis.myzen.co.uk/orchard.html>, Accessed 11 May 2017

¹⁹ Department of Veteran Affairs, "Repatriation Handbook", https://www.dva.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/consultation%20and%20grants/repatriation/PO_HBook_ch5.pdf p.21.

²⁰ AWM4 24/9/20, Australian imperial Forces War Diaries 1914-1918, 4th Australian Machine Gun Company, February 1918

their target. There were many casualties from this friendly fire which may have included William as he was again sent to hospital.²¹

William also spent much time behind the lines where events included an official photograph, presentation of medals by General Birdwood, voting for Queensland state elections and a sports afternoon.

Early on 25 March 1918, with no transport available, they had to carry their machine guns and equipment with help from 25 men in 16th Battalion. The Aussie soldiers were in excellent spirits singing as they marched towards their billets even though they had not had a meal at midday.²² The keenness and cheerfulness of the Aussie soldier was often mentioned by commanders of other troops as well as the local French villagers.²³

Early in April, the 4th Machine Gun Company became part of the 4th Machine Gun Battalion which then fought in the German Spring Offensive and the Allies Hundred Days Offensive.

William was on leave in England on 12 November 1918 but caught influenza so more hospitalization at Harefield and Weymouth. On 17 March 1919 William wed Francis Riley at St Thomas's church, Somercotes in Derbyshire. They embarked on *Demosthenes* on 26 July 1919 arriving home nearly two months later.²⁴

William was discharged as medically unfit in October 1919. It is not known where he lived in Victoria and whether he received a soldier settlement plot of land. But from emails with his granddaughter, she believes William and Frances had strong willed personalities. William was a jack-of-all-trades trying his hand at shearing, labouring, wood carting and market gardening. In 1926, he was awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal which

²¹ AWM4 24/9/23, Australian imperial Forces War Diaries 1914-1918, 4th Australian Machine Gun Company, May 1918, p.8.

²² AWM4 24/9/21, Australian imperial Forces War Diaries 1914-1918, 4th Australian Machine Gun Company, March 1918, pp.8,9

²³ Australian War Memorial, Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918, Volume V, Chapter XVIII, RCDIG1069681, pp.641, 648

²⁴ 'SOLDIERS AND WIVES', *Advocate (Burnie, Tas. : 1890 - 1954)*, 3 September 1919, p. 1.

were sent to his father.²⁵ He died in 1954 at age 58 and is buried at Lilydale Lawn Cemetery.²⁶

William certainly fulfilled his role as a machine gunner in the 4th MGC, yet with all his forfeiture of pay for being AWL, he may not have had a big paycheck to bring back to Australia to start a new life with his wife and growing family of 13 children.

²⁵ Service record of William Henry Clark, p.39.

²⁶ Cecilia Clark to Sue Wyatt, email, 9 May 2017, original held in author's possession.

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