

Private

Vernon Alfred Charles Batchelor

4th Field Artillery Brigade

Service Number 26239

Being a member of the 2023 Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize has given me a new understanding on how the soldiers that left the Tasman Peninsula, are still connected to the present and history in the community. Before choosing a soldier, I visited the community's war memorial that documents the soldiers from the area who have been killed in service. I continued to explore further and discovered the Nubeena Soldiers Memorial Walk. While looking at each plaque I noticed a familiar name that is still well known on the peninsula, only to later find out that the soldier was related to a staff member from my school, as well as a student in my class. This is the journey of how I found Vernon Alfred Charles Batchelor, the soldier whose story has captured me and led me to share it with you today.

Vernon Alfred Charles Batchelor, also known as 'Uncle Riley', to his family, was born on the 19th of April 1892. Although Nubeena is listed as his birthplace, the Batchelor family had already moved to Tunnel Bay at the time, and living relatives believe this to be his more exact place of birth. Vernon was one of six children (four boys and two girls) born to Sarah and Jabez (known as Old Jabe) Batchelor. Vernon's Father was a local carpenter and a timber cutter who, along with one of his other sons, Young Jabe, built several houses



(Nubeena State School photo 1900)

throughout Nubeena, most of them still standing today.

Vernon, as well as his other siblings, underwent his education at Nubeena State School which was later renamed Tasman District School.

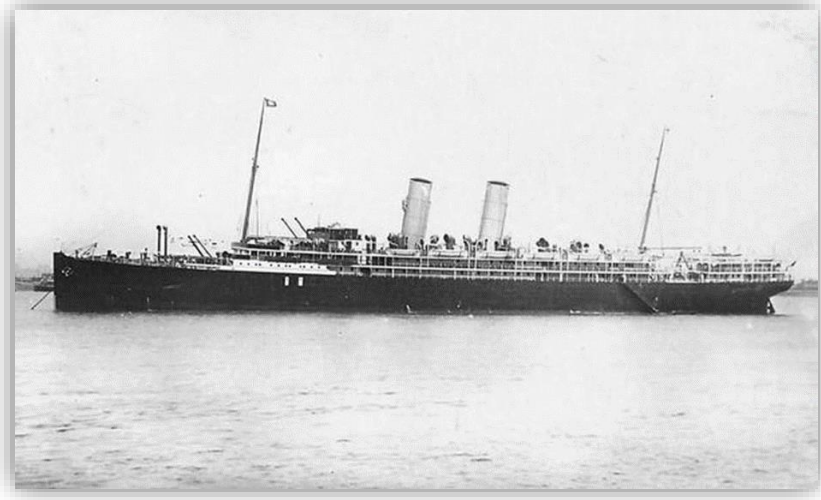
On the 24th of December 1904, the Batchelor family suffered the significant loss of Vernon's mother, Sarah, who passed away aged 48 years old. After Vernon completed his education, he began working as a tram conductor in Hobart where he continued working until his enlistment. Over 10 years after Sarah's death, and only 3 months prior to Vernon's enlistment, the family once again suffered a loss, this time due to the death of Old Jabe (Vernon's father) who sadly passed on September the 2nd 1915.



(Vernon Alfred Charles Batchelor)

Over a year after World War One (WW1) began, on the 21st of December 1915, Vernon made the journey up to Hobart where he signed the enlistment forms for the first time. It wasn't until the 2nd of February 1916, when Vernon was notified that he had to be re-examined which led him to re-sign his official enlistment papers that were confirmed and recorded in Claremont. His medical files on enlistment refer to Vernon as a natural born citizen aged twenty-three years and ten months old, with grey eyes and both fair complexion and skin. He was described as 5'4" and had a noticeable scar on his left shin and another on the back of his right hand. Due to the absence of either parents or a wife, Vernon had noted his older sister, Eva Spaulding, as his next of kin.

On the 1st of August 1916, Vernon's journey began by embarking from Melbourne as a Driver with the 25th Howitzer Brigade, 4th reinforcements on the HMAT Orsova A67. The boat was approximately 160 metres long, could hold up to 1310 passengers, and reach speeds up to 30 kilometres per hour.



(The HMAT Orsova A67)

Vernon then spent the next month and a half on the sea before finally disembarking in Plymouth, England on the

14th of April 1916. The next 6 months of his life was devoted to serving in camps throughout England in preparation for the battles ahead of him on the western front. Not only did Vernon have to learn to adapt to the climate and training in England, but also the isolation from being away from his big family back home on the other side of the world. During his time training, Vernon sent a small photograph of himself to his sister Eva with the following note on the back,

*"This is only an amateur photo, but I hope you will like it, best love always,
Vern xxx."*

Not only did Vernon exchange letters with family, but almost 2 months after his arrival in Plymouth, he received a letter from Miss I. M. Watson. Although not much is known about the relationship between Vernon and Miss Watson, it is assumed that the two exchanged letters regularly prior to his death. Unfortunately, none of the letters are to be found, nor any further information on Miss Watson, but I'd like to believe that if things ended differently, she and Vernon may have lived their lives out together and grown a family of their own.

On the 26th of October 1916, Vernon transferred to the 22nd Field Artillery Brigade/117th Howitzer Battery, 2nd Division and reverted to a Gunner on the 1st of January 1917. After

months of training in the UK, Vernon began his travels to France on the 26th of March 1917. By the 3rd of May, he was once again transferred, only this time to the 4th Field Artillery Brigade. Vernon's arrival in France would have come with a whole new element to adapt to. Frequent periods of rain had consequently caused waterlogged conditions and the land was heavily affected by the newly destructed drainage systems.

In June (1917), the brigade made its way to Flanders where they found themselves in constant action over the following months. On the 7th of June, the 4th Field Artillery Brigade partook in a successful British assault on the Messines-Wytschaete Ridge. Within the first few hours of the battle, the British, New Zealand and Australian forces had already claimed all their objectives; despite this, the Germans continued resistance for the following seven days. The Battle of Menin Road commenced on the 20th of September and Vernon spent the 5 days of the battle overcoming entrenched German defensive positions which led to success for the British even though the AIF sustained 5,013 casualties in action. Only a day after the victory of Menin Road, the 4th Brigade assisted in the Battle of Polygon Wood which launched at 5:50am on the 26th of September. It was stated that the British obtained the majority of their objectives without difficulty, yet the noise of battle was still distinctly compared to a roaring bushfire. Vernon once again survived another struggle for his country. Sadly, the battle costed Australia 5,770 casualties between the 26th of September and the 3rd of October.

After months of continuous fighting, and only a day since the last battle won, Vernon and his brigade partook in the Battle of Broodseinde Ridge. On the 4th of October 1917, just before dawn, the Australian troops were shelled heavily on their start line and one seventh of the men were already casualties before the attack even began. By the time the Australians launched their troops, they were confronted by a line of German troops already advancing towards them. Although the unexpected interruption, the men continued to forge through the German assault waves, gaining all their objectives along the way. The battle costed Australian Divisions the casualties of 6,500 men, one of them being Vernon Alfred Charles Batchelor.

Sometime in the morning, on the 4th of October 1917, Vernon was reported as a soldier wounded in action. It wasn't until later that day when he died from shellfire wounds at the dressing station near Hellfire Corner, Ypres, Belgium. Vernon had been a serving soldier for

twenty months when he was killed at only 25 years of age. The Batchelor family was sent telegrams to notify them that Vernon was missing in action and then shortly after received the letter of verification on his death. In the years following the news, his sister Eva Spaulding kept in contact with the AIF, discussing details on Vernon's medals, next of kin and even a photograph of his grave, Grave 17, located at Birr Cross Road British Cemetery, Plot 1, Row E. He was awarded the British War Medal No.44403 and Victory Medal No.43905, both were sent to his sister Eva, some years later.

Eva also received a tin trunk containing an array of Vernon's personal belongings that were sent home from a Mrs. D Summers. The trunk incorporated, 10 handkerchiefs, 1 holdall, 1 pair of boots, 1 cap and cover, 1 leather purse, 1 balaclava cap, 1 scarf, 1 pair of spurs, 1 lanyard, 3 pairs of mittens, 2 straps, 1 strop, 1 pair of socks, 1 pair of gloves, letters, photos, postcards, 1 devotional book, 2 books, 2 kit bag handles and lastly, a banjo that he had purchased in either England or France. Vernon was heavily missed by family, friends, and the whole community, even now, his memory lives on in the Tasman Peninsula.

On the 13th of October 1917, only 9 days after Vernon's death, his brother Jabez Alfred Batchelor enlisted for WW1. At the time of his enlistment, Jabe would have been unaware that his brother had been killed and he wouldn't have received the devastating news until after he signed the enlistment papers. Young Jabe was 37 years and 9 months old and after his time spent serving, returned to his hometown of Nubeena on the 23rd of July 1919. As for Eva, I believe the death of her brother would have come as a shock and surprisingly, the name 'Eva' has been passed down the family's generations and a current descendant now holds the name. Although it's been over 100 years since Vernon's death, he will never be forgotten along with the rest of the boys that were lost from the Tasman Peninsula and all the Australians who made the sacrifice for our country.



Myself reading my Pilgrimage in honour of Vernon.

A view from the coach of Birr Cross Road Cemetery



Vernon's plaque on the Nubeena Soldiers Memorial Walk

Vernon's grave after decorating it with the Tasmanian flag and a wooden cross with a handwritten message on it

