



The Life of Harold Elijah George
MM

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FRANK MACDONALD
MEMORIAL PRIZE SOLDIER
RESEARCH WRITEUP

Relation

For the 2022-2023 Frank Macdonald memorial prize, I decided to conduct my solid research project on my Great-Great Grandfather, Harold Elijah George MM. In our household, he would be occasionally brought up whenever our family would discuss the topic of the first world war, and he has always been seen favourably and one of our most influential ancestors. Through completing this research, I have gained more knowledge than I would have believed to have existed about him and his journey. The discoveries made were intriguing and addressed many questions surrounding his life which would have otherwise not been laid to rest. But as one uncovers evidence, such knowledge opens many new paths and questionings. If there is anything to be learnt from history, is that information of old withers away into the past. Only through extensive research can someone gain only of the tinies of slices of a larger picture. This rule of thumb is



Harold Elijah George sometime after the war



Lawrence James Saunders' grave

ever present in relation to Harold, as any assumed letters he had written back to his family whilst fighting in Europe were likely burnt down with his house. Whatever information that was contained in these letters is now forever lost.

For part of the Frank MacDonald prize, I needed to conduct a pilgrimage and present my findings to the rest of the group. A fitting place to conduct such a pilgrimage and an ode would be at a grave in order to pay respects to such sacrifice. But as Harold did not die in the war, I looked to find another relative. After some initial research I decided to pay my respects to Lawrence James Saunders, who was the brother to Harold's future wife, Laura Saunders. Lawrence would die either on the 8th or 9th of February 1918.

Enlistment

Harold Elijah George MM was born on April 5th, 1892, to William and Emma George in Hadspen, Tasmania. He led a typical childhood and early adulthood, living in Hadspen for most of, if not all, his adolescence. His job before the war was a Labourer and by the time of his enlistment at Pontville in August of 1914, He was 22 years old, 5 foot 8 ½ inches, weighing in at 12 stone 3 pound, with grey eyes, brown hair, and a dark complexion. He enlisted and joined the 12th Battalion, D company. Eventually embarking on a journey that would forever change his life.

Wartime

Although the information that could be found about Harold in the early stages of the war is sparse, there is enough to provide a series of broad dates and events in relation to his service.

On the 20th of October, Harold embarked from Hobart to Alexandria on the S.S “Geelong”. Once arriving in Alexandria, his training begun, eventually embarking on the S.S “Devanha” from Alexandria on the 2nd of March 1915 to join the Mediterranean expeditionary force and to eventually fight on the Gallipoli peninsula.



The S.S Geelong, which carried soldiers from the 12th Battalion.

Harold was at Gallipoli from April 1915 to January 1916 and was admitted to hospital in Malta for his teeth, as he had contracted tonsillitis. By March of 1916, he was to go to France.

Fewer than two months into his time in France, he was wounded in action, taking a bullet to his left hand and fingers on the 29th of May 1916. He was transferred between multiple field hospitals, one Australian Casualty Clearing station and one ambulance train before being brought to England by ship on the H.S “Newhaven”, finally being assigned to the 4th northern general hospital in Lincoln on the 6th of June. He stayed in England until he returned to France on 22nd of September 1916.

Harold went back to his service with the 12th battalion on 13th of October, and would eventually receive multiple promotions:

- On the 22nd of November he was appointed to Lance Corporal.
- On the 28th of December he was promoted to Corporal.
- On the 10th of April 1917, he was promoted to Sergeant.

The exact reason for promotion are not clear.

Battle of Lagnicourt

The Battle of Lagnicourt is one of the battles where Harold Elijah George made the most influence and impact. This period of his service also yields the most detailed information about his relation in any specific event during the war. On April 15th 1917, the German forces conducted an attack on the 1st Australian division to divert supplies from the British 5th army, which was defending the town of Arras. The German attack only managed to break through at the village of Lagnicourt. The 12th battalion, Harold's battalion, was stationed directly between the village and the Hindenburg line. The 12th battalion ended up taking the full force of the German attack which resulted in near destruction of multiple Australian companies. This was largely due to being severely outnumbered and were not given warning prior to the Germans preliminary bombardment. Harold, when describing the severity of the war to the assessment appeal tribunal, deliberately stated that he was:

“with Capt. Newlands, V.C. and Sg[t]. Whittle V.C. when the company was surrounded at Lagnicourt”.

This statement contains interesting piece of information, as it displays that Harold must have viewed that the events that took place at Lagnicourt to have had some sort of significance and value to be worth mentioning. In addition, to specifically state that he was present with two of the most notable people during the battle. Cyril Falls, a wartime journalist, had wrote about the associated events that took place at Lagnicourt:

"The most brilliant part of all was played by two support platoons of the 12th Battalion under an officer and non-commissioned officer... Captain J. E. Newland and Sergeant J. W. Whittle. In the sunken portion of the Lagnicourt — Beaumetz road, not 300 yards from Lagnicourt, they disposed their little force back to back, lining either bank and holding the enemy's attack from both north and south, the latter coming from the southern houses of the village. A far more serious danger arose when a machine gun appeared in the sunken road on their flank. Had that gun come into action the men in the road would have been annihilated; but Sergeant Whittle rushed forward and killed the detachment with bombs before a shot had been fired."

This gives insight into what Harold was stating, giving light to what the conditions of the situation that was on the battlefield, and the importance of the roles of both Newland and Whittle and also, by extension, Harold.

Harold Elijah George's Military Medal

During the beginning stages of the research, the reason for the military medal being awarded to Harold was uncertain. Harold makes little specific mentions of the medal apart from when he had requested to acquire anew in 1952, after the original had been destroyed along with the rest of his house. The initial assumption as for why he had received such an honour might have been due to his service at the aforementioned battle of Lagnicourt as the prospects and evidence given appears to make it the leading candidate, as Harold would receive his military medal in June, along with J. E. Newland and J. W. Whittle. Hence why confusion was brought upon the evidence in relation to Lagnicourt specifically. The reason as to why Harold had received the Military Medal was for commandeering a platoon on 6th May, during the Battle of Bullecourt. This battle was a separate but not unrelated series of events after the battle of Lagnicourt. According to file for honours and awards of the 1st Australian division, Harold Elijah George had received the Military Medal for:



A Military Medal, the whereabouts of Harold's is uncertain

“Gallantry and Devotion to Duty whilst commanding a platoon in operations East of BULLECOURT on May 6th, 1917. When an enemy counter attack broke through our line on his right, Sgt. GEORGE at once led his men in an attack on them with such dash that they were driven back and the line restored. During the whole operation his coolness and cheerfulness set a splendid example to his men.”

The Battle of Bullecourt was also mentioned in his statement to the Assessment Appeal Tribunal, Harold writing:

“at Bullecourt I was the only Sgt. of my company to right through the action and came out almost crazy”

Whether if he was actually the only sergeant in his company to be fully involved with the counterattack or if this is an over exaggeration is up to speculation. If what Harold states is true, then both the 12th battalion unit dairies and Cyril Falls' journalism may provide an insight supporting Harold's claims. Falls tells that:

“On the morning of the 6th the expected counter attack fell upon the 3rd Australian Brigade. Isolated attacks were made in the early hours, and a company of the 10th Battalion was sent up to support the 12th. At 5.3[0] a.m. the enemy's fire reached what is described as “an unprecedented intensity”, and a few minutes later the Germans advanced in strength from the north... with the aid of Flammenwerfer, [the German attack] made swift and alarming progress. The Australians were driven back to the Central Road, and, shaken by their encounter with the most demoralizing weapon ever employed in trench fighting, retreated down Pioneer Avenue. The German advance was then stayed by the post of the 1st Battalion, 1st Brigade, at the point of junction of the two trenches... but in the interval the survivors of the 11th and 12th Battalions were

rallied and, with a party of the 1st, led to the attack... Eventually the Australian barricade was established rather further east than before.”

Notably, this states that the survivors of the attack were rallied, which draws parallels to the information provided described in the file for honours and awards. It also gives an explanation to why he might have been the only combat ready sergeant in his company, as many of the possible other sergeants or higher-ranking officials might have been unable to tend or lead, considering the situation.

In hindsight, the notion that Harold Elijah George would be awarded the military medal for his service in Bullecourt was initially doubtful, especially when considering the alternative. It is of the utmost inconvenience that such an important document, the file for honours and awards, was glossed over and not considered with more attention. It had the potential to save numerous hours of valuable and time saving research, which could have been more effectively used elsewhere. The easiest and most convenient path is only known at the end of the journey.

Other Minor Information

As the 12th battalion would not proceed to fight in a lot of engagements compared to other units, the rest of the other battles will be bundled together here if they are relevant to Harold's story.

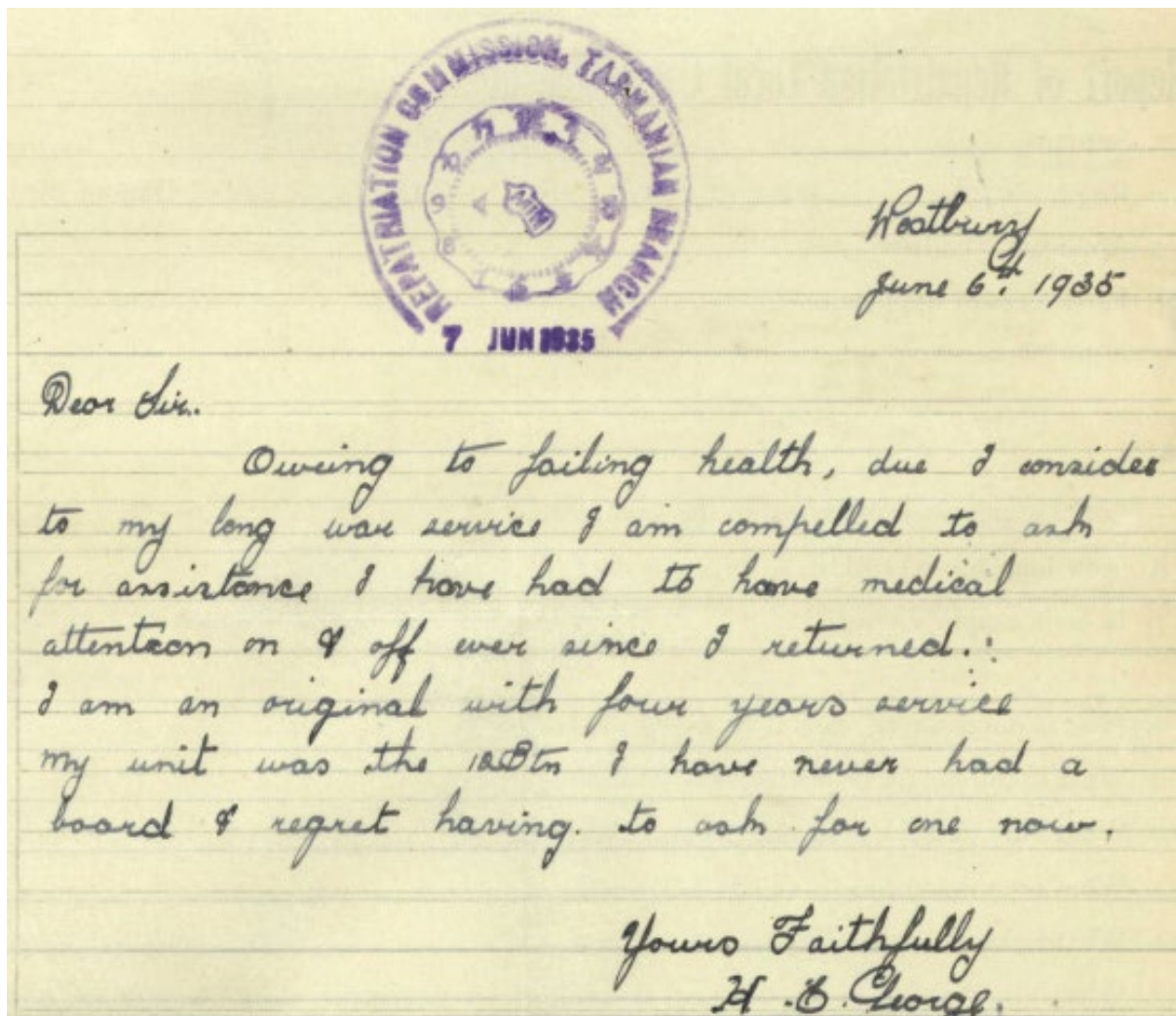
At Polygon Wood, Harold was hit by a shell, leaving his body numb for days. The side of his tunic all scorched and ripped. Harold states that he could have easily gone to hospital if he wanted to but instead saying that *“I would not leave the boys”*. Harold does not specify and specific date to when this occurred, but it was most likely between 26th of September and 6th of October as this was when the battle of Polygon Wood was conducted.

From the 17th of January to 16th of February 1918, Harold was assigned to the 1st Australian Training battalion and attended the 17th rifle course at the Australian school of musketry at Tidworth in Sutton Veny, Perham Downs. He was a non-commissioned officer part of the 16th platoon of C company, also to assist in the training of reinforcements. He would qualify in the 2nd class with a *“fair knowledge”* of the use of the Lewis gun.

Post War and Death

Harold was discharged in Hobart on the 23rd of February 1919, serving a total of 4 years and 68 days. He married Laura Saunders on the 11th of February and had 3 children together, Valerie, Lloyd and Maisie. Valerie would be named after a place Harold visited for a "holiday" with a small group from the 12th battalion with Lieutenant Leslie Dadsen MC at St Valery sur Somme.

Harold became a farmer, living in Westbury. By the 1950s, he owned approximately 200 acres of land with 200 sheep, of which he loved dearly.



One of Harold's Letters requesting for a pension, as he was entitled under the Australian Soldiers' Repatriation Act 1920

In 1935, Harold requested to be granted a pension as compensation for the conditions and sacrifice he made in the war. As earlier in 1914, the Australian Government introduced the Australian Soldiers' Repatriation Act 1920 which was a war pension scheme allowing veterans wounded by the war to receive a pension. The ordeal between Harold, his doctors and the assessment appeal tribunal is an intricate and complex series of events and it is not worth going too in-depth. What is made clear however is that the eventual and gradual pension increase did little to help his deteriorating health.

Harold's farmhouse had burnt down on February 11th, 1954. All his belongings, including his medals and any diaries or possible letters that were related to the war were either severely damaged or could not be recovered. He would end up leasing another set of land with sheep until his health eventually deteriorated due to old age and became unable to continue working.

In the last few years of his life, Harold had been in and out of hospital multiple times, and by 1966 he had almost become completely disabled. On the 10th of February 1968, his doctor gave him his final diagnostic and written the following:

“Patient referred due to emotional stress in house – unable to cope for himself. Getting steadily weaker and losing weight for several years and apparently feeling cold... shivering in bed with several blankets and all fires on – It's the middle of summer”.

Harold would eventually die 7 months later, on the 25th of October of the same year. Officially of Bronchopneumonia. He currently rests at Carr Villa Memorial Park in Launceston, Tasmania.

Final Statement

Researching Harold, I have come to understand that even though some soldiers were fortunate enough to survive conflict, the physical and psychological scars will be ever present. In Harold's case, his physical injuries were minor in comparison to his long-term mental health. The effects of this made it difficult for him to earn a living as a farmer and because the full effects of psychological injury of war were not understood until more recently.

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