

James Harold Cleaver: Service Number 31715

3rd Australian Light Trench Mortar Battery

James Harold Cleaver was born in Launceston on 24th August 1889, one of eleven children to Sarah and John Cleaver. James was their fifth son and spent his childhood in a home in Lyttleton Street, later gaining employment as an ironmonger in the city which he called home.

On October 10th, 1916, James decided to enlist for the Australian Imperial Forces and headed to Claremont, Tasmania. In enlisting, James left behind his fiancé, Muriel Andrew who worked as an assistant in her father's photography business. James' younger brother Lewis also enlisted only weeks later, following in his brother's footsteps. With the war having been fought for two years at this point, it is not clear what James' motivation for enlistment may have been. What is known though, is that Muriel's brothers Harold and Basil Andrew had also enlisted and were already on their way to Europe at this point. In addition, pressure was mounting at home for able-bodied men to take their place in the Australian Imperial Forces.



James Harold Cleaver upon enlistment, 1916



Upon enlistment, James was 27 years and 1 month old. He was 5 foot 5 in height and weighed 10 stone and 6 pound. James was also described as having brown eyes, dark hair, and a dark complexion. After completing his medical exam, James was declared fit and assigned to the 9th reinforcements, due to join the 15th Field Artillery for the Australian Imperial Forces. Subsequently, James travelled to mainland Australia, and began training at Maribyrnong, Victoria.



James Cleaver, front row, third from right.

After completing his training, James boarded RMS Orontes on December 23rd, 1916. While aboard the ship, James spent much time noting in his journal the distance travelled and any events deemed of importance. James suffered from sea-sickness while aboard, but kept a record of days where he was able to enjoy the sunshine and was feeling brighter. In early January, there was an outbreak of mumps aboard. Following this, James recorded that a body was buried at sea on February 2nd, and that the convoy had been approached by destroyers in the Atlantic as they moved closer to Europe. Such events highlighted to James that the risks to soldiers began long before they reached the frontline.

James disembarked in Plymouth, England on February 17th, 1917. At this point he immediately began additional training in map reading, administration, telephoning and gunnery. During his time in England, he noted the weather was consistently cold and miserable: a vast difference to the Australia he had left behind. In early March, he recorded everything was frozen and the camp was hit by severe snowstorms which prevented training and did little to lift soldiers' spirits. As the weather warmed, King George inspected 50,000 troops: an occasion noted down as one of great importance on April 17th. A short eight weeks later, James had completed his courses and was declared fit for war on June 15th, 1917, leaving England for Le'Havre, France on July 23rd.

One of James' first experiences of war was when on July 31st, Hazebrouck suffered their "first bombardment" (Cleaver, 1917). This was important to the allies, as all supplies travelling via railway needed to go through the town on their way across France. After this, rain increased and James became stuck with the artillery, and attempts to fight back were paused.



*James Cleaver –
Centre with white hat
with the 9th
Reinforcements of the
15th Field Artillery
Brigade.*

At the beginning of August James briefly joined the Australian 1st Light Trench Mortar Battery. He spent time in Etaples, France, where many wounded soldiers were based. James noted passing through and being billeted in towns like Amiens and Poziers in his journal. He also stated that the craters caused by mine explosions during the attack on Messines only weeks earlier were “huge”.

A week later, on August 5th, James joined the 3rd Australian Light Trench Mortar Battery, who were in Vieux-Berquin, France. The 3rd Australian Light Trench Mortar Battery would have been typically aligned with the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Division. From this point, training continued: drills with gas masks, guns, and batteries were undertaken, supplies were disinfected, and tactical exercises rehearsed. These formalised training sessions were again broken up with recreational football and boxing. Trench Mortar Batteries were typically high on the list of counter attacks by enemy fire, due to their ability to fire a high amount of ammunition in a short amount of time. Because of this, James would be left open to gas attacks and invading parties from the enemy, so it was imperative he was trained and ready for battle.

On September 12th, 1917, it was revealed that James would be involved in an upcoming tactical response, and on September 20th, he was involved in an attack on Menin Road, close to Polygon Wood, Belgium. At 5.40am the allies launched an attack on the enemy using the new ‘bite and hold’ tactic, whereby the infantry would complete a barrage of shelling until allied soldiers were nearly on top of the enemy. From this point, the enemy soldiers could be captured, and the allied forces could advance without the fear of counterattack by enemy artillery. 5000 casualties were recorded during the attack, but the new technique was declared a success for the allies in fine weather. Unfortunately, James found himself with a shrapnel wound to his right eye and was admitted to the 10th Casualty Clearing Station at Remy Siding. From here, James was admitted to Number 3 General Hospital at Le Treport, where he underwent surgery. Several weeks of recuperation followed.

On November 11th, James re-joined his unit in Champagne, France. From here, they moved into Messines South, to relieve the front-line troops over the Winter. Despite the expectation that it would be quiet over the winter, instructions were for artillery to harass the enemy and to be prepared for at least one raid. James’ journal stated that things were “fairly quiet”. From this we know that it is likely that they would have come under shellfire and the

conditions of the trenches would have deteriorated rapidly into muddy pits. Conversely, this quieter time allowed for duckboards to be laid and accommodation improved. James remained here with the 3rd Light Trench Mortar Battery until moving to Aldershot Camp on January 31st, 1918.

On March 1st, 1918, the Battery were moved back into the frontline at Spoil Bank, near Ypres. Once there, they were attacked and exposed to gas. Raids were also a constant threat, as the German army sought both intel and prisoners. Fortunately for James, he remained in relatively good health and safe from capture.

By early July, James was at Meteren, France, where his journals spoke of burn out across the front line. By the 13th, they were back into the line to relieve the 2nd Australian Light Trench Mortar Battery at Strazeele, and on July 18th, guns were laid quiet to assist the Brigade on their left with taking of Meteren. Towards the end of the month, James found himself closer to Hazebrouck, where the warfare continued. Two of the 3rd Light Trench Mortar Battery's Corporals were killed during this time: Gordon Blackwood and Daniel Purden. This only added to the lower morale of the troop.



Meteren, France, 1918 – A section of the war ruined village (AWM, 2023)

In August, the 3rd Light Trench Mortar Battery were moved into the Somme region of northern France. Unit diaries state that places such as Pont Remy and Vaire-sous-Corbie were passed through en route to the Gillaucourt Line, where they stayed until August 15th. During their time in the line, unit diaries praise the shooting efforts of the gunners, whose “very effective” barrage, enabled the advance of the 11th Battalion. James’ journals also note that he had a ride in a tank and a close call as a runner while on the line. Once safely at Corbie, all troops bathed, rested, and cleaned their clothing and equipment, before moving back into the line from August 22nd until the 26th.

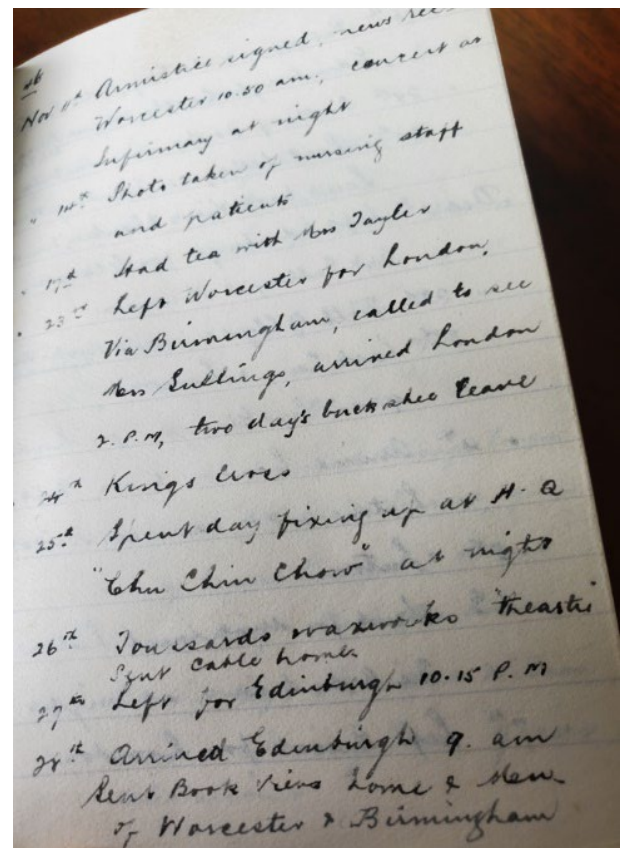
Unit diaries for the 3rd Light Trench Mortar Battery conclude at the end of August, however, James’ journals state that he was in the vicinity of Mont Saint-Quentin, which had been surrendered by the Germans on September 1st. On September 14th, James was taken to the 41st Casualty Clearing Station at Proyart, suffering with a medical condition attributed to life in the trenches. From here, James was moved to Rouen on September 21st, and eventually back to the Southern General Hospital in Birmingham, England, for surgery, on October 15th.

While in hospital, recovering from surgery, World War I came to an end. James noted this in his diary with an optimistic “armistice signed” written on November 11th. Following this, pictures, or “snaps” were taken to celebrate. James also sent home a picture book dated November 12th, 1918, to his beloved Muriel – no doubt, the desire to head home at the forefront of his mind.



Image taken at the Southern General Hospital, Birmingham, England, November 12th, 1918.

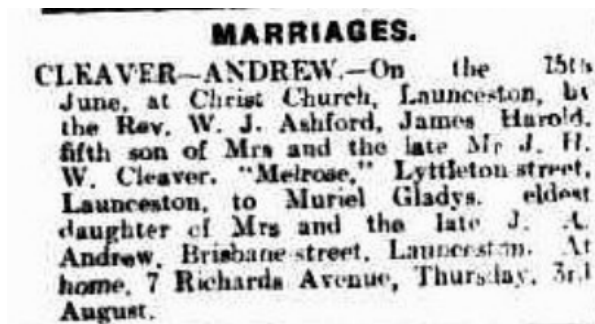
James Cleaver's personal journal: Written between December 1916 and December 1918 from Europe. At the top of this page is the entry for November 11th, 1918.



Unfortunately for both James and Muriel, that homecoming would be some time away. Due to the nature of WWI, thousands of Australian personnel were across the world and keen to get home. James was discharged from hospital on November 26th, 1918. Two weeks later, he was attached to the War Chest Club, where soldiers in similar situations could go and spend time together. On December 16th, James attended AIF headquarters, where it was decided that he was strong enough to work while waiting to return home to Australia.

James ceased his journal at the completion of 1918. At this time, he was working somewhere in England and had the chance to see his comrades and visit places such as theatres whilst contributing to the rebuilding of Britain. In August 1919, James was transferred back into the 3rd Australian Light Trench Mortar Battery for the last time. He finally boarded the ship *Ascanius* on November 6th and arrived back in Australia on December 23rd, 1919: exactly three years to the day after he left.

James Harold Cleaver married Muriel Gladys Andrew in Launceston on June 15th, 1922. The two set up a home in Richards Avenue, Launceston, where James worked with his brothers in the family business, The Cleavers, with Muriel supporting from home. The couple welcomed their one and only daughter, Betty, in 1927.



*Wedding announcement from The Examiner
– Published July 29th, 1922*

James did his best to live a life forgetting the horrors of the Western Front and did not speak of his experiences. However, in 1933, James was a victim in an armed robbery at work. Having not spoken of the war, what crossed James' mind at this time can only be imagined. To distract himself from this experience, he found solace in time with his family and gardening at home.

When World War II began in 1939, James was a family man with a 12 year old daughter, a wife and a business to run. Despite this, on October 21st, 1942, at the age of 52, James enlisted in Launceston to again help his country.

Due to his age, James never saw active duty during the course of WWII and was able to watch Betty grow up into an adult, marry, and give him three grandchildren. When Muriel passed away in 1968, James moved to Deloraine to live the last of his days with Betty and her family. James Cleaver passed away on September 30th, 1970 at the age of 81.

James and Muriel Cleaver rest together in Carr Villa Cemetery, Launceston, Tasmania.



*James & Muriel Cleaver, together with daughter, Betty Saggars at
Carr Villa Cemetery.*