

Daniel Leonard Beames



A Brief History

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Image: Daniel's grave at Buttes New British Cemetery at Polygon Wood, Belgium (Photo by author)

Pre-War Life

Daniel Leonard Beames was born in Portland, Victoria, in 1884. The son of Daniel (see Fig.1) and Rebecca Beames, he had thirteen siblings.¹ His Great Grandfather, the convict, Robert Beams (the 'e' in Beames was added later in an effort to 'throw off the convict stain'), had been transported to Van Diemen's Land in 1803 for stealing drapery from his employer. As fate would have it, Robert was convict servant to Colonel Paterson when he sailed up the Tamar to establish the first northern settlement in 1804. The Beames family tree remains extensive in Tasmania, but Daniel's branch meandered across Bass Strait to Portland in the late-19th Century, and the family remains there today.²

Little is known of Daniel's life before his enlistment. After leaving school, he had served three years in the Australian Naval Reserves before being apprenticed to his father, Daniel senior (1846-1940), who was a master boat builder. At the age of 31, Daniel stood 175cm tall and weighed a wispy 65kg. I have not been able to locate a photo of him, but his service record notes a dark complexion, brown hair, and brown eyes.³ Perhaps mercifully, Daniel never married or had children, because like so many Australians of his generation he was not long for this world.

Most of the Beames/Beams were farmers, required by the war effort to remain on the land, and Daniel was the only one in his large extended family to enlist. On 4 February 1916, Private Daniel Leonard Beames, 8th Infantry Battalion, service number 5038, joined the 14th Depot Battalion at Ballarat, and on 22 March 1916 transferred to Broadmeadows where he was allocated to the 16th Reinforcements of the 8th Battalion.⁴ On 1 April 1916, he embarked from Melbourne aboard the HMAT Suffolk and set sail for Egypt.⁵

Service

Daniel disembarked at the Suez on 14 May 1916, but two weeks later he set sail again, this time aboard the Tunisian, bound for France. He and 127 other reinforcements eventually reached the 8th Battalion on the evening of 29 July. The following morning, freshly assigned to his corps, Daniel marched to Canaples, 20km north of Amiens, in northern France.

The first significant action Daniel saw was at the Battle of Pozières Ridge (23 July-3 September 1916). Here, on 18 August 1916, he was shot in the back amidst the fighting at Munster Alley trench. It was a close call, but the wound was slight, and he was luckier than many of his comrades.⁶

¹ His siblings' names were Mary-Ann, Rebecca, Margaret, Robert, Charlotte, Albert, Ethel, Elsie, Bertha, Beatrice, Gertrude, Stanley, and Emily (Geni.com, accessed 5 August 2017, <https://www.geni.com/people/Daniel-Beames/6000000033034747830>).

² I have spoken to several descendants of Daniel's siblings.

³ National Archives of Australia, service records B2455, p.15 accessed 5 August 2017, <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=3060902&isAv=N>

⁴ This and all significant service dates have been sourced from Out of Battle, Daniel Leonard Beames (accessed 5 August 2017, <http://outofbattle.blogspot.com.au/2008/01/private-daniel-leonard-beames-8th.html>) and checked against his service records.

⁵ RSL Virtual War Memorial, Daniel Leonard Beames, accessed 5 August 2017, <https://rslvirtualwarmemorial.org.au/explore/people/110952>

⁶ Out of Battle, Daniel Leonard Beames; National Archives of Australia, service records B2455.

Pozières, which comprised part of the Battle of the Somme, is considered an Allied victory, albeit gained at a ghastly cost. Pozières Ridge was case and point. Australia's official historian, Charles Bean, noted with sobering clarity that it was "more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth."⁷

Going into the battle, the 8th Battalion's effective strength was 39 officers and 749 enlisted men. The initial waves were cut to shreds. Despite several pushes, and in one case reaching the enemy line, the advance was repelled by 'galling' machine gun fire.⁸ Pinned down in the carnage, it was two days before Daniel made it to Casualty Clearing Station No. 44 at Puchevillers, but after this he was quickly transferred to General Hospital No.22 at Estaples. He rejoined the 8th on 4 October, just 45 days after his wounding.⁹

But Daniel's woes were not over. On 9 November 1916, he was removed from the lines with a severe case of 'trench fever', a common-wartime infection with a harrowing list of symptoms. Three days later, he was admitted to hospital at Rouen and then quickly evacuated to the London General Hospital on 17 November. On 18 December, he was moved to Hanover VAD Hospital and was finally discharged on 25 January 1917.¹⁰ After a short furlough, Daniel reported back for duty on 10 February and returned to France five weeks later, but he did not rejoin the 8th Battalion until 10 April. Healthy and reunited with his pals, Daniel moved out for the embattled Belgian town of Ypres, and one of the most infamous battles of the War.

Death

At 1am on the morning of 4 October 1917, Daniel and the other men of the 8th began a clandestine move off Anzac Ridge towards their 'tape line', just behind the front line, from where they prepared to assault the German entrenchments. From 2:26am to 6:00am, the men waited, fully exposed to the enemy. At 5:30am, half an hour before their own artillery began its barrage, they came under an imposing German bombardment. Ordered to remain motionless, they suffered 'heavy casualties' until, just after 6:00am, they pushed forward 'in grand style'. Now the enemy added infantry fire to their artillery and the Battalion's casualties were dreadful, especially the right flank, which was slowed by the marshland and thick web of barbed wire.¹¹

Daniel died in this attack, which formed part of the Battle of Broodseinde Ridge, itself part of the Battle of Passchendaele. It was the Allies' most successful attack at Passchendaele, but it was achieved at a terrifying cost. Between 4 and 12 October, the advance produced 6,423 Australian casualties, 201 of whom were from the 8th.¹² Such numbers evoke little emotion until we reflect that each whole number represents a person, just like Daniel, with a family and a story and an unmeasurable absence.¹³

⁷ Diary of Charles Bean, accessed 5 August 2017,

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/RCDIG1066619/?image=12>

⁸ Australian Imperial Force unit war diaries, AWM4 Subclass 23/25 - 8th Infantry Battalion, accessed 5 August 2017, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/RCDIG1005158/?image=5>

⁹ National Archives of Australia, service records B2455.

¹⁰ National Archives of Australia, service records B2455, p.52.

¹¹ Australian Imperial Force unit war diaries, AWM4 Subclass 23/25 - 8th Infantry Battalion.

¹² Diary of Charles Bean.

¹³ Daniel's recorded age at death was 32, but this is inconsistent with his birth records (reg. no. 19438). He was baptised at St Stephens, Portland, on 13 September 1884, thus he was 33 when he died.

Commemoration

A parent's love is surely the most powerful emotion there is; an ancient and insuperable instinct, which runs in our DNA. Daniel's father survived him by 23 years, dying at the improbable age of 94 in 1940,¹⁴ which for him must have felt like a bitter inversion of the natural order.

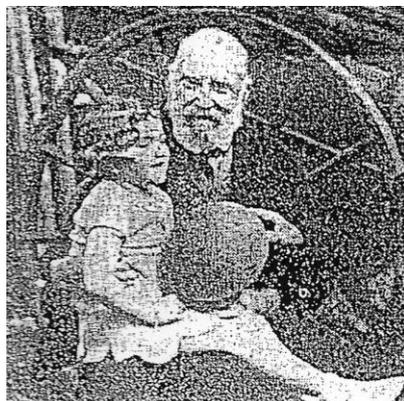


Figure 1. Daniel Senior at Victoria's Centenary celebrations in 1934
(Newspaper clipping courtesy of Carol McDonald, Dandenong, Victoria)

On the first anniversary of Daniel's death, his family published the following poem in the *Portland Guardian*:

He sleeps not in his native land,
But under foreign skies;
Far from those who love him,
In a hero's grave he lies.
Gone, but not forgotten.¹⁵

The poem they published on the second anniversary struck a melancholier note:

Now the flags are o've the roadway
And the boys are coming home,
When their loved ones wait to greet them,
And their mothers fondly bless them;
O God, send comfort to the aching heart.
Whose boys will never come.¹⁶

The War took a huge toll on regional communities throughout Australia, and Portland was no exception. Daniel was one of 64 ex-students from Portland Elementary School who had, by May 1916, shipped out to fight.¹⁷ In 1923, the front page of the *Portland Guardian* listed the names of all 271 Portland men who volunteered for active duty, 24 of whom made the 'ultimate sacrifice'.

Today, Daniel is remembered as one of Australia's many war heroes. At the Australian War Memorial, his name appears on the wall of honour (see Fig.2), and the local Portland RSL honours his name with a cross (see Fig.3), which every ANZAC day is adorned with wreaths.

¹⁴ *Melbourne Argus*, 3 July 1940, p.8.

¹⁵ *Portland Guardian*, 4 October 1918, p.2.

¹⁶ *Portland Guardian*, 3 October 1919, p.2.

¹⁷ *Portland Observer and Normandy Advertiser*, 11 May 1916, p.3.



Figure 2. Commemoration cross at the Portland RSL, Victoria
(Photo courtesy of Portland RSL)



Figure 3. Commemoration cross at the Portland RSL, Victoria
(Photo courtesy of Portland RSL)

Thanks to the Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize, I was privileged to visit the western front in April, where we learned a great deal about the conflict and about soldiers' wartime experiences. I saw where Daniel had died and visited his grave at Buttes New British Cemetery in Belgium (see Fig.4 and cover image). It was surprisingly emotional and appropriately confusing.



Figure 4. The cross I left at Daniel's grave
(Photo by author)

Reflection

I do not know if Daniel fought valiantly or died cowering in a shell-hole, but he is a hero in my eyes regardless. He volunteered for and endured unimaginable horrors because he believed in something greater than himself. Mine is a culture of narcissism, so such selflessness is foreign and awe inspiring.

However, it was not soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice. Daniel's decision to place himself in mortal danger was noble, to be sure, but it was a choice. Daniel's loved ones had no such choice. When he was finally struck down, Daniel ceased to exist and in that moment, all his suffering ended; but for his family, it was just beginning. A century on, though, and there is no one left to grieve for him. Daniel is a war hero; a symbol of the Australian spirit. His final burden has been lifted, and he belongs now to us all.