

# George Ernest Atkins

## Early days



Photo: George Atkins was described as being 5 foot 5 inches tall with a fair complexion, brown hair and blue eyes. He also had a distinctive mark on a finger on his left hand.

George Ernest Atkins was born in April 1894 to parents Charles and Ellen Atkins. He lived in Lindisfarne where he grew up with his six siblings'; Alma, Ivy, Lucy, Thomas, Charles and Frederick and followed the Anglican religion. As a child, George attended Bellerive state school before becoming a waiter later on in his life. He stayed in this job until the war broke out in 1914 and he attempted to join the military<sup>1</sup>. Initially, George was rejected from the Australian imperial force as he suffered from asthma, but as the war continued and more men were lost to the fighting, Australia became in need of more soldiers. This meant that the entry standards for soldier's health dropped so requirements such as having good teeth, perfect vision and being taller than 5'6 were relaxed<sup>2</sup>. After a second attempt to enlist, George was accepted into the 3<sup>rd</sup> training battalion on the 30<sup>th</sup> of August 1915 and earned the rank of Private. He departed from Melbourne on the ship the HMAT Afric on the 5<sup>th</sup> of January 1916, and arrived in Suez, Egypt, around a month later on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February<sup>3</sup>. Here, he trained with other soldiers from Australia and New Zealand, practising military tactics, undergoing gruelling physical training for 8 hours a day and surviving in the harsh climate of the area. Although this may have sounded

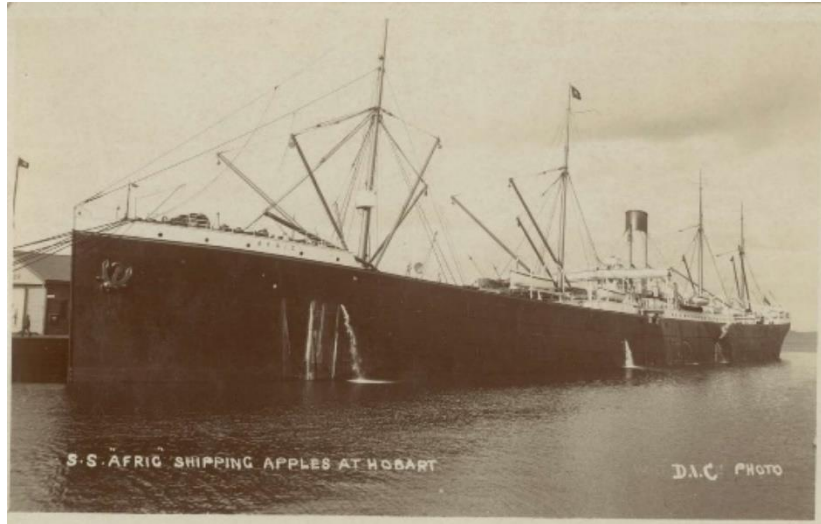
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<sup>1</sup> Virtual War Memorial, George Ernest Atkins (n.d) accessed 24 November 2023 [Atkins, George Ernest](#)

<sup>2</sup> Enlistment Standards (n.d.), Australian War memorial, accessed 14 April 2024  
<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/enlistment>

<sup>3</sup> National Archives of Australia: Australian Imperial Force, Base Records Office; Atkins George Ernest  
<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=3038596&isAv=N>

dreadful, soldiers had Sundays off which meant that they were allowed to visit the local areas and explore. Most of the Australian men had never ventured out of their home country before so the bustling streets in places such as Cairo were eye opening to many <sup>4</sup>.



The Ship HMAT Afric docked in Hobart shipping apples. It was used during the 1<sup>st</sup> world war to transport soldiers and horses. The ship was sunk on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 1917 after being torpedoed by a German submarine

## Conflict

After training in Egypt for eight weeks, George Atkins embarked from Alexandria on the ship the Transylvania. He then went to Marseilles France where he joined the 1<sup>st</sup> entrenching battalion on the 26<sup>th</sup> of June 1916. The entrenching battalion was made to fast track and improve the training that soldiers underwent so that the Anzacs in Gallipoli would have capable reinforcements when they needed them. However, heavy casualties in the French region of Somme meant that the soldiers in the 1<sup>st</sup> entrenching battalion were not sent to Gallipoli, instead redirected to help troops in the French region of Pozieres <sup>5</sup>.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1916, George Atkins was taken on strength to the 12<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion. He was then sent to fight in the battle of Pozieres on the Western Front. Pozieres was an important offensive for the allied forces as the landscape of Pozieres village contained a ridge that the German army used to view the allied lines. This made the Australian soldiers easy targets to the Germans. By taking control of Pozieres ridge and the adjoining Mouquet farm, the Australian army would be able to overturn this scenario and gain protection while driving the Germans back and getting a clearer view of their position <sup>6</sup>. The initial attack on Pozieres village was

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<sup>4</sup> Duncan beard, 2022; Kangaroos by the Pyramid accessed 10 March 2024

<https://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/98/articletwo#:~:text=At%20its%20peak%2C%20there%20were,soldiers%20were%20allowed%20to%20explore>

- SS Afric (n.d.), Wikipedia, accessed 15 July 2024. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS\\_Afric](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Afric)

<sup>5</sup> 1st Anzac Entrenching Battalion (n.d.), Virtual War Memorial, accessed 10 March 2024 <https://vwma.org.au/explore/units/2973>

<sup>6</sup> AWM London, (n.d) accessed 11 march 2024. [Pozieres: the Battle of Somme](#)

successful, although it resulted in heavy artillery fire in retaliation from the enemy <sup>7</sup>. Following attacks on the Germans proved successful and Pozieres was soon in Australian hands, but not without sacrifice. This battle became one of Australia's most devastating conflicts with 23 000 Australian soldiers left wounded, dead or prisoners of war. In only a couple of weeks, Pozieres had the same casualty rate that Gallipoli did in over 8 months <sup>8</sup>. Historian Peter Burness described Pozieres as "the worst place to be in the world" (Burness, n.d). An excerpt from Charles Beans Diary describes just how horrific the conditions at Pozieres were:

*"Pozieres has been a terrible sight all day ... The men were simply turned in there as into some ghastly giant mincing machine. They have to stay there while shell after huge shell descends with a shriek close beside them ... each shrieking tearing crash bringing a promise to each man – instantaneous – I will tear you into ghastly wounds – I will rend your flesh and pulp an arm or a leg – fling you half a gaping quivering man (like those that you see smashed around you one by one) to lie there rotting and blackening like all the things you saw by the awful roadside, or in that sickening dusty crater."- (Charles Bean, 1916) <sup>9</sup>*



## The Final Days

In August of 1916, George failed to make contact with officers for multiple days and was originally thought to be missing in action. This was later changed to killed in action on the 6th of March 1917 after another soldier named Frederick Lewis confirmed George's death. He stated "We went over the top together at Mouquet Farm where he was hit with shrapnel and that was the end of him. He died instantly. I knew him well as he lived near me at Lindisfarne." He was only 22. George's body was eventually found and buried on the Pozieres battlefield, but as war changed the landscape, his grave and body vanished again, tragically missing forever. He is thought to have died sometime between the 19th and 22nd of August 1916. As George's death was not confirmed for a while after he passed away, his family did not receive a death certificate until March 21st, 1917, 7 months after he

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<sup>7</sup> Pozieres (n.d.), Australian War Memorial, accessed 24 November 2023. <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/resources/1916/pozieres>

<sup>8</sup> Anzac Portal, (n.d) accessed 6 April 2024. [Battle of Pozières 23 July to 3 September 1916](https://www.anzacportal.com.au/battle-of-pozieres-23-july-to-3-september-1916)

<sup>9</sup> Fromelles and Pozières (n.d.), Australian War Memorial, accessed 10 March 2024. <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/anzac-voices/fromelles-pozieres>

died. Documents show that the Atkins family had to write letters to the war office to get confirmation of his death <sup>10</sup>. The struggle to verify his passing would have only added to the pain that his mother was feeling and prolonged the process of gaining closure. One small comfort for his mother Ellen was that she received George's possessions that he had while he was away. This included playing cards, a brush, a comb, 2 handkerchiefs and a bag. The Atkins family also received 2 medals on George's behalf, the British War Medal issued by King George the 5<sup>th</sup> for those who had left their homes to fight and the Victory Medal to celebrate the Allies defeat of the Central Powers <sup>11</sup>.

## Remembering George

Although no one knows where his final resting place is, there are many memorials commemorating George's life. At Bellerive Primary School, George's old place of education, a memorial stone was erected to honour those who were students at the school and went to war for their country. The stone reads "when you go home, tell them of us and say, for your tomorrow we gave our today."<sup>12</sup>. George also has a tree and plaque on the Soldier's Memorial Walk in Hobart, and his name appears on the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Museum. Although his body is not buried at the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial, it still holds importance and honours him for the ultimate sacrifice that he made.



George's name at the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial in France

<sup>10</sup> National Archives of Australia: Australian Imperial Force, Base Records Office; Atkins George Ernest  
<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=3038596&isAv=N>

<sup>11</sup> *British First World War Service Medals* (n.d.), Imperial War Museum, accessed 24 November 2023. [https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/first-world-war-service-medals#:~:text=British%20War%20Medal%20\(1914-1920\)&text=This%20silver%20medal%20was%](https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/first-world-war-service-medals#:~:text=British%20War%20Medal%20(1914-1920)&text=This%20silver%20medal%20was%20)

<sup>12</sup> Places of Pride: Bellerive primary school memorial stone (n.d) accessed 24 November 2023  
<https://placesofpride.awm.gov.au/memorials/218196>





## The Wars effect on the Atkins Family

George's story is just one of thousands that shows how horrific and tragic World War One was for families all over the world. Not only did the Atkins family lose George, their oldest son Frederick also died during this time. Frederick joined the AIF on the 28<sup>th</sup> of July 1915, only a month before his younger brother <sup>13</sup>. He fought as a part of Australia's 47<sup>th</sup> battalion in Egypt but became very ill, suffering from fits and neurasthenia (a condition that causes issues in the nervous system due to extreme fatigue <sup>14</sup>). Frederick's poor mental and physical health was deemed permanent by the medical examiner, so he was discharged and transported home to Tasmania in 1916 <sup>15</sup>. Sadly, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 1919, Frederick passed away suddenly. He is buried at Cornelian Bay Cemetery in Hobart.

In the space of only two years, Ellen Atkins lost her young, previously fit and healthy children due to the devastating impacts of the war. George and Frederick were only 22 and 25 years of age when they died, meaning that they missed out on a lifetime of opportunities such as getting married and having families. This goes to show how the war impacted families forever, taking away loved ones and leaving their futures forever unknown.



Frederick John Atkins



George Ernest Atkins

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<sup>13</sup> Virtual War Memorial Australia: Frederick John Atkins accessed 24 November 2023  
<https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/264769>

<sup>14</sup> Cheung F.M (n.d.) *Neurasthenia*, Sciencedirect, accessed 15 July 2024. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/pharmacology-toxicology-and-pharmaceutical-science/neurasthenia>

<sup>15</sup> National Archives of Australia (n.d) Record Search: Frederick Atkins Accessed 1 June 2024  
<https://www.naa.gov.au/>

Virtual War Memorial Australia (n.d) accessed 24 November 2023. <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/116554>