

# 722 SGT Charles George Williams MM and Bar

B Coy 17 Battalion 1<sup>st</sup> AIF (WIA x 3)

My grandfather was 722 SGT Charles George Williams he was a Veteran of Gallipoli and the Western Front. During the course of the war, he was wounded three times and earned the Military Medal and Bar for bravery in the field. **(Photo 1)**



Photo 1: 722 SGT George Williams

He was born in Sydney to Charles Williams a Cornish coal miner who had emigrated with his wife Phobe Williams from England in the late 1800's. He attended school in Camperdown Sydney and like all boys back then became an Army Cadet later serving as a soldier in 33<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment. **(Photo 2)**



Photo 2: Army Cadet Camp Pre 1914

When the war started my Grandfather was working as Motor Driver with the City of Sydney Electrical Department. He joined the 1<sup>st</sup> AIF on 01 Mar 15 and commenced training at Liverpool Camp where he was allocated to B Company 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion. **(Photo 3)** This unit was part of the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade 2<sup>nd</sup> Division. He was promoted to Corporal prior to the unit's embarkation.



Photo 3: B Coy 17th Bn 1st AIF

The 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion embarked from Synney on the HT Themistocles **(Photo 4)** on the 12 May 1915 sailing to Egypt, a journey of six weeks. They sometimes relieved boredom on the ship by gambling. I found a great picture of him playing the game Crown and Anchor, which is a dice game played with a board. **(Photo 5).**



**Photo 4: HT Themistocles Sailing to Egypt**



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**Photo 5: Crown and Anchor Game HT Themistocles**



**Photo 6: Arriving at Port Said Egypt**

They arrived in Egypt, landing at Port Said in early June (**Photo 6**) and of course like all the Australian in Mena Camp (**Photo 7**) they received further training and played the tourist. (**Photo 8 and 9**)





**Photo 7: Mena Camp Egypt**



**Photo 8: Rifle Range Butts Mena Camp 1915**



**Photo 9: My Grandfather on a Camel in front of the Sphinx and Pyramids**

After spending some time in Egypt training, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division landed at ANZAC Cove on 20 Aug 1915. They took part in the August Offensive, taking part in the attack on Hill 60. It was during this battle that he was wounded for the first-time receiving gunshot wounds to his hand and eye. He was evacuated back to the hospital on Lemnos Island,

and then to the King George Hospital in London. **(Photo 10)** This was the largest hospital in England during the war. Here he also became friends with a nurse who drew a cartoon for in her autograph book. **(Photo 11)** There has been many rumours in my family about this relationship.



Photo 10: SGT Williams in King George Hospital London



Photo 11: A drawing by my Grandfather for a nurse.

He rejoined the 17<sup>th</sup> Bn on Gallipoli on the 16 Sep 1915. The 17<sup>th</sup> Bn at that time had been operating in a defensive role, defending Quinn's Post since the August attacks. **(Photo 12)** This position was one of the most fought over positions on the Gallipoli Peninsula. He stayed there until the evacuation in Dec 1915 when they returned to Egypt.





**Photo 12: 17th Bn Quinns Post Gallipoli**

The 17<sup>th</sup> Bn was withdrawn from the peninsula along with the rest of the Allied forces after the decision was made to abandon the campaign. After the withdrawal a further period of training in Egypt was undertaken as the AIF was reorganised and expanded from two infantry divisions to five. In March 1916, the 17<sup>th</sup> Bn was sent to France as each of the AIF's infantry divisions were transferred to the Western Front.

My Grandfather moved up to the front line in April and after some training in trench warfare **(Photo 13)** took over the forward position in the eastern Armentieres in one of the so-called nursery sections.



**Photo 13: SGT Geroge Williams in Training Trenches France 1916**

While in this location my Great Grandfather 2810 PTE Charles Robert Williams joined the 17<sup>th</sup> battalion much to the surprise of my grandfather who did not know his father had enlisted at age 45. **(Photo 14)**



On the 23 July 16 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division was sent to fight during the Battle of the Somme. There the 17<sup>th</sup> Bn took part in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions first major battle at Pozieres. While not taking part in any major attack the battalion served in the line throughout the action mainly around the old Pozieres Windmill. The windmill was perched on the ridge just beyond the village, its sails once caught the winds that sweep in from the Atlantic across these exposed upland stretches of the Somme. Like Pozieres itself, the windmill was battered out of existence by artillery bombardment. If you were to look from the windmill ruins back to the village and to the right towards Mouquet Farm, about 1.8 kilometres away, the eye takes in a sweep of countryside which, in the words of official historian Charles Bean;

*Photo 14: 2810 PTE Charles Williams and 722 SGT George Williams*

***“was more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other spot-on earth”.***

By that, Bean meant the 23,000 casualties suffered here by the 1<sup>st</sup> AIF between 23 July and 4 September 1916. More than 6,700 of them were killed in action or died of wounds. In 1932 Bean persuaded the Australian War Memorial to buy the windmill ruins, and it was from here that French soil was dug up to scatter on the coffin of Australia's Unknown Soldier when he was laid to rest at the Memorial on 11 November 1993.



One of these casualties was my Grandfather's best mate 652 SGT James Patrick O'Toole (**Photo 15**) who had joined the AIF on the same day as him and had gone through the same training and experience on Gallipoli prior to going to France and the Western Front. SGT O'Toole was killed at the Pozieres Windmill on the 25 Jul 16. The Red Cross Casualty Report by 2918 PTE Banbury reporting on the death of three fellow members of the 17<sup>th</sup> Bn stated:

***"These men were pals of mine and I saw all three-lying dead. SGT O'Toole was in a communication sap and PTE Anthony was thrown out on the parapet of our own trench dead. Pte Gutherie was in the German communication sap. This was at Pozieres. We had to retire back because we had run short of*** Photo 15: 652 SGT James Patrick O'Toole

***bombs and so their bodies were left behind and are now in no mans land, or at least they were when I left. The Germans made a tremendous counter attack early yesterday morning and these bodies may be blown up and therefore are reported missing."***

SGT O'Toole has no known grave, and his name is recorded on the Australian National Memorial, Villers-Bretonneux. He was my Grandfathers best mate.

At the same time as SGT O'Toole death my Great Grandfather was wounded with gunshot wounds to his hand and back on the 26 Jul 1917 and he was evacuated to England. My Grandfather received his second wound, being wounded lightly by shrapnel. He remained with his battalion in the line until he became sick with bronchitis and was evacuated back to England.

After a period of recovery from his wound and sickness my Grandfather was transferred to Command Depot No 1. My Great Grandfather was already located at this unit in the process of being returned to Australia due to his wounds, sickness and being over age for combat operations returning to Australia in early 1917.



This Command Depot was one of four Australian Command Depots in the UK dealing with soldiers who had been discharged from Hospital and needed training before being sent back to France. Command Depot No.1 was capable of accommodating 4,000 men and was established at Perham Downs in the summer of 1916. Here my grandfather was trained on the new Lewis Gun a weapon that he would become very familiar with, and it would play a major role in his last battle.

My Grandfather rejoined the 17<sup>th</sup> Bn in late Oct 1917 where he was promoted T/SGT in a Lewis Gun Section of B Coy. At this time the battalion was transferred to the Somme. For the remainder of the year, they undertook defensive duties along the front, they were not involved in any major attacks.

In early 1918, the battalion was involved in repelling the German Spring Offensive and undertaking defensive operations in the Somme Valley. These operations were known as peaceful penetrations. Peaceful penetration was the term coined to describe the tactics employed by Australian troops to gradually capture sections of the German front line during the lull between the end of the German Spring Offensive of 1918, and the launch of the Allies own offensive in August. Small patrols and raiding parties would seize isolated German positions with surprise actions, unheralded by the usual hallmarks of attacks and larger scale trench raids such as artillery bombardments. In addition to the local tactical advantage that resulted from these operations they also did yield considerable intelligence about the condition of the German forces, their morale, and their future plans, that was vital in the preparation of the Allied offensive. Peaceful penetration was also referred to as "nibbling" or "winkling".

In May 1918, Monash was appointed Commander of the Australian Corps and now had all five Australian division under his command. Monash's Australian Corps was involved in helping to stem the March German offensive and it was during the Battle at Hamel that Monash really secured his reputation. Monash's skilful planning and attention to detail resulted in a triumphant attack and capture of the town by Australian and American troops. This was the beginning of a series of successful campaigns by Australians that continued until their last battle in October 1918. Monash wanted to move away from what he considered to be outdated British tactics, believing that:

***“the true role of infantry was not to expend itself upon heroic physical effort, not to wither away under merciless machine-gun fire, not to impale itself on hostile bayonets, but on the contrary, to advance under the maximum possible protection of the maximum possible array of mechanical resources, in the form of guns, machine-guns, tanks, mortars and aeroplanes; to advance with as little impediment as possible; to be relieved as far as possible of the obligation to fight their way forward”.***      **Gen Sir John Monash**

He supported the view that the most effective warfare involved many different types of weaponry and defences working together the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

When Monash took command the 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion was holding a line to the SW of Morlancourt straddling the Bray Corbie Rd. The local German Commander decided it would be a fine time to attack B Coy 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion position and outflank the Australian position. The attack failed and it was during this action that my Great Grandfather

earned his first Military Medal. His citation sums up this example of the type of action being waged daily on the Somme at this time.

***“On morning of 14th May 1918 near MORLANCOURT, when enemy attacked our line, this N.C.O. was with a bombing section that held back a strong enemy bombing attack down our trench, sufficiently to enable a block to be established. Corporal WILLIAMS did good work and set a fine example in holding the enemy back and protecting a Lewis gun by bombing when the enemy were in front and rear of his section of trench.”***

With the last desperate German Offensive defeated, the Allied armies turned to the offensive and the 17th Bn participated in the battles that pushed the German Army ever closer to defeat. The Battle of Amiens commenced on 8 Aug 18, with an attack by more than 10 Allied divisions comprising of Australian, Canadian, British, and French forces with more than 500 tanks. Through careful preparation, the Allies achieved surprise and the use of Monash's new tactics, led by the British Fourth Army, broke through the German lines. During the attack, tanks attacked German rear positions, sowing panic, and confusion. By the end of the day, a gap 124 kms wide had been created in the German line south of the Somme. The Allies had taken 17,000 prisoners and 339 guns. Total German losses were estimated to be 30,000 men, while the Allies had suffered about 6,500 killed, wounded and missing. The fast-moving Australian Corps of LTGEN John Monash and Canadian Corps of LTGEN Arthur Currie playing the decisive roles in this offensive defeating 9 of the 19 German Divisions defeated during the course of the battle. This German General Erich Ludendorff was to later describe the first day of the battle as:

***"the black day of the German Army".***

From this time until the Australians were withdrawn from fighting in early Oct 1918, all divisions of the Australian Corps saw nearly continuous action. Rather than disbanding entire divisions, any consolidation of strength was made under the British system of reducing brigades four battalions to three battalions. During the Hundred Days Offensive that ended the war, the Australian Corps, along with the Canadian Corps, were used repeatedly as spearheads for offensives.

The Australians and Canadians pursued the Germans up the Somme River valley. Their greatest obstacle to crossing the Somme was the redoubt on Mont St Quentin which was situated on a bend of the Somme River and dominated the whole area. Mont St Quentin was only 100 metres high but was key to the German defence of the Somme Line, and the last German stronghold before the Hindenburg Line. It overlooked the Somme River approximately 1.5 kilometres north of Peronne. Its location made it an ideal observation post, and strategically, the hill's defences guarded the north and western approaches to the Peronne. The Mont had to be taken in order to break the German defensive line.

This assault planned by Monash was a high-risk frontal assault which required the Australian 2<sup>nd</sup> Division to cross a series of marshes and attack the heights. This plan failed when the assaulting troops could not cross the marshes. After this initial setback, Monash manoeuvred his divisions in the only free manoeuvre battle of any

consequence undertaken by the Australians on the Western Front crossing the Somme by night on hastily erected pontoon bridges.

The 2nd Division crossed to the north bank of the Somme River on the evening of 30 August. At 5 am on 31 August, supported by artillery, four significantly undermanned Australian battalions, with about 650 men in each, charged up Mont St Quentin, ordered by Monash to "scream like bushrangers". The Germans quickly surrendered, and the Australians continued to the main German trench-line. In the rear, other Australians crossed the Somme by the bridges which Australian engineers had saved and repaired. The Australians were unable to hold their gains on Mont St Quentin and German reserves regained the crest. However, the Australians held on just below the summit and next day it was recaptured and firmly held. On the, 01 Sep 18, Australian forces broke into Péronne and took most of the town. The next day it completely fell into Australian hands. In three days, the Australians endured 3,000 casualties but ensured a general German withdrawal eastwards back to the Hindenburg Line. Here my Grandfather fought his last battle and earned a Bar to his Military Medal.

The 17<sup>th</sup> Bn was the centre battalion in this Australian operation which is sometimes regarded as the finest achievement of the AIF. It was a difficult position as it was an uphill fight for the troops, across very open ground where they were vulnerable to attack from the German held heights above. My Grandfather battalion used Lewis Guns, Rifle Grenades, and Trench mortars to outflank the German positions. The battalions positioned to the right made a lot of noise to distract the Germans, while the centre and left battalions got a foothold on the Mont and in Feuillaucourt.

By 7 am, the 17<sup>th</sup> Bn had gained the village of Mont St Quentin and the slope and summit of the hill, by working in small groups using fire and manoeuvre. The five German divisions holding Mont St Quintin were confused and dispersed, and many fled. However, the Germans quickly regrouped and launched numerous counterattacks, resulting in fierce fighting and heavy losses. Much of the fighting was hand-to-hand combat. The outnumbered Australians were pushed back off the summit of Mont St Quentin, and lost Feuillaucourt. Relief battalions were sent, and with their reinforcement, all the areas were retaken by the Australians. My Grandfather's citation sums up this Infantry soldiers battle:

***During the attack on MONT ST. QUENTIN, near PERONNE, on 31st August 1918, and after the objective had been gained, Sergeant WILLIAMS went forward with a party to mop up the village.***

***He, single handed, dealt with numerous enemy snipers, and either killed or captured the occupants of the enemy posts that were holding up the advance. Later, when the enemy counter attacked, he volunteered personally to man and fire a Lewis Gun which was out in a forward position, and on which three No. 1's had been wounded in 15 minutes. He was wounded whilst manning this gun which he kept in action for a considerable time under very heavy rifle and machine gun fire. This N.C.O.'s behaviour during the whole of the operations is worthy of the highest praise and was an example of daring and devotion to duty.***

The painting by Fred Leist you have in your handout shows this final action when the 17 Bn had been pushed back to Elsa Trench. **(Photo 16)** This painting is of my



Grandfather's actions and depicts him on the Lewis Gun. For many years this painting was attributed to the wrong battalion and brigade, Several years ago I convinced the AWM Museum Research Staff it depicted the 17 Bn. They even went up a ladder to confirm the colour patches were the 17<sup>th</sup> Bn.



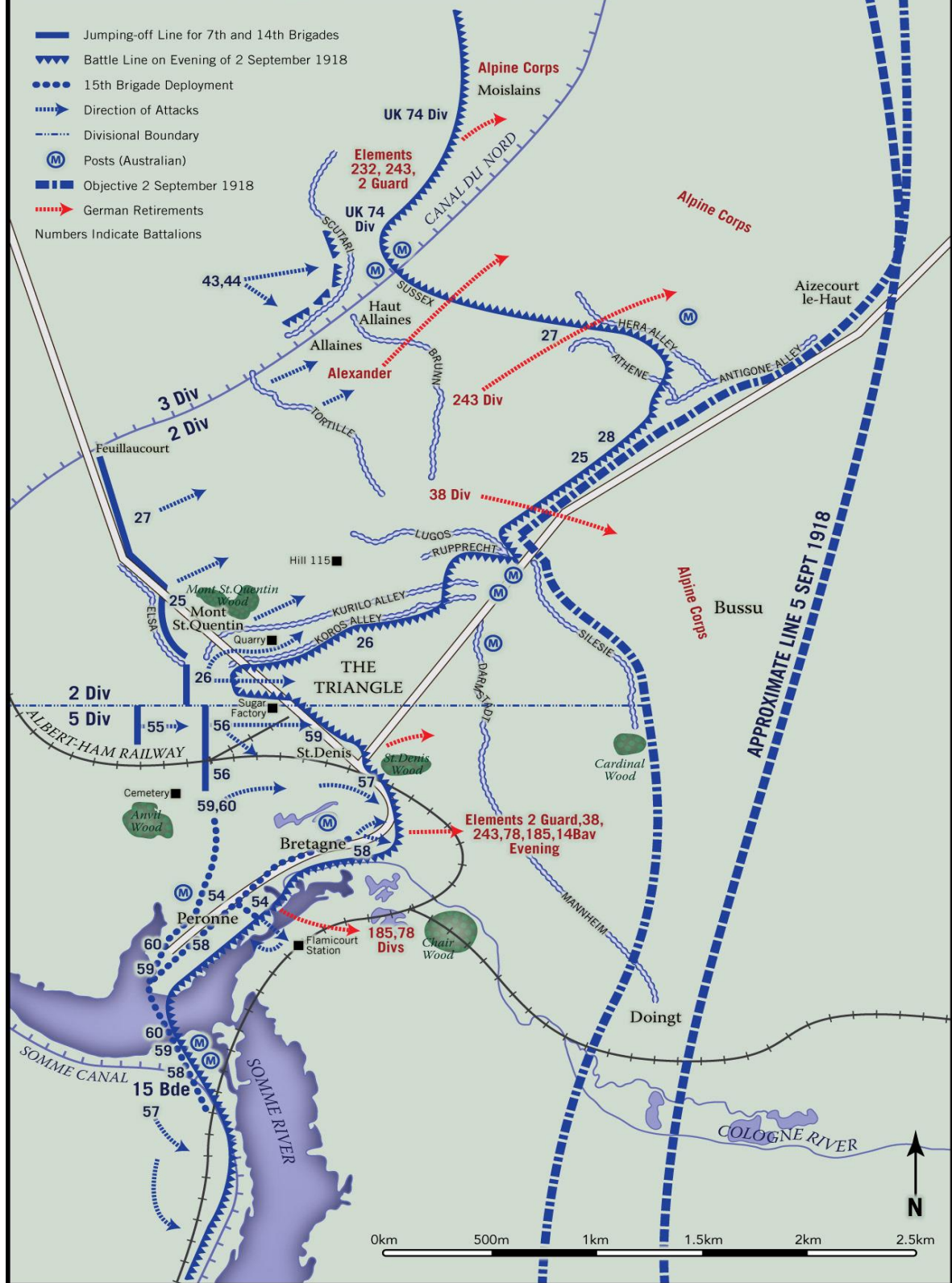
**Photo 16: 17th Bn defending Elsa Trench against German Counterattacks 31 Aug 1918**

Of the 650 men that started the battle only about 350 soldiers remained fighting in the 17<sup>th</sup> Bn. Later in the battle they would be relieved by the battalions of the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade. Please note in the picture you will see German Prisoners in the trench with the Australians. They were some of the 150 who were held in Elsa trench by the Australians. One of these was a doctor. When my Grandfather was wounded for the third time, he received severe gunshot wounds to his face and neck. The German Doctor applied a dressing to the wound and told my Grandfather to keep the bandage on until he got to hospital in England. Which he did and was later told by Doctors in England that this action saved his life. This German Doctor treated the Australians still fighting before he treated his own soldiers. I wish I knew his name. The fact I am here today is a direct result of the actions of that German Doctor.

# THE ATTACK 31 AUGUST 1918



# THE ATTACK 2 SEPTEMBER 1918







The 5<sup>th</sup> Division continued the fight once the Mont was secured and captured Perone after fierce fighting by the 03 Sept 18. This battle included battalions from every Australian state. There was no less than eight Victoria Crosses awarded for actions during the battle. British Commander General Lord Rawlinson remarked that this feat by the Australian troops under Monash's command was the greatest of the war. During the period Aug to Oct 1918, General Monash reported that the Australian Corps had defeated some 39 German divisions, a full fifth of the entire German strength of 200 divisions on the Western Front.



My Grandfather sent some time recovering in Hospital in England and he was there when the war ended. He was invalided back to Australia on the 12 Dec 1918 and arrived in Sydney 01 Feb 1919. He was discharged on his return where he learned that he had been awarded the Military Medal twice. After a long recovery period he was given a job with the Post

**Photo 17: CAPT George Williams VDC 1943**

Marster Generals Department the forerunner of Australia Post and Telstra. He became a telephone linesman and eventually was in charge of the main telephone exchange in Drummoyne, Sydney. He was married to Anne Chivers, and they had two sons my father Robert and my uncle Donald. During WWII he served with the Volunteer Defence Force (VDC) as a Captain. **(Photo 17)** He had tried to join the 2<sup>nd</sup> AIF but was not accepted because of his incapacitation from his WWI wounds. He was a foundation member of the Abbotsford RSL and a member of the Masonic Club. He was very active in supporting his mates in the 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion Association and would march every ANZAC Day with my Great Grandfather up until his death. **(Photo 18)** SGT Charles George Williams died on the 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1959 at the age 64 from cancer in his neck and face where he had been wounded.

World War One had taken 40 years to kill him.



Photo 18: 722 SGT George Williams MM and Bar, 2810 PTE Charles Williams and Unknown Soldier

**“Remember not the way they fell or how, remember why.”**

### **Endnotes:**

Please refer to the bibliography for full details of the works cited here.

### **Essay Research:**

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5. Australian War Memorial War Diaries AWM4 Subclass 23/34 - 17th Infantry Battalion
6. Australian War Memorial Red Records Casualty Report 652 SGT Janes Patrick O'Toole.
7. Also see the bibliography below.

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1. Photos 1-3 Peter Williams Private collection.

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1. Photos 14 and 15 Peter Williams Private Collection.
2. Australian War Memorial Red Records Casualty Report 652 SGT Janes Patrick O'Toole.

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1. Central Army Records MM and Bar Citations 722 SGT Charles George Williams.

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1. Central Army Records MM and Bar Citations 722 SGT Charles George Williams.
2. Photo 16 Australian War Memorial ART02929 The Capture of Mont St Quentin by Frederick William Leist

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1. Map 3 The Eight Mont St Quentin VCs 31 August - 2 September 1918 from The Battle of Mont St Quentin Peronne 1918 by Michele Bomford

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1. Photos 17 and 18 Peter Williams Private collection.

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