

## Lieutenant David Frederick Clifford Coles

Rod Martin



([www.memorial.act.gov.au](http://www.memorial.act.gov.au))

Thirty-five year-old David Coles was a Kentish man by birth. He arrived in Australia in 1913. He had trained as a professional artilleryman in England and it would seem that he came to Australia to take up an instructor's role at the recently created Royal Military College, Duntroon. On 1 May 1916, he enlisted in the Australian Military Forces and received the rank of second lieutenant. That rank was increased to first lieutenant almost immediately. It is interesting to note that he sailed from Port Melbourne with men from the newly created 3 Division on A7 HMAT *Medic* on 20 May – only nineteen days after enlisting. It may be that, as it was a new division, Major-General John Monash's unit was in need of experienced officers and made an offer to David, one that he could take up immediately. The fact that he was quickly raised to the position of first lieutenant may well indicate that his skills and experience were recognised and needed. David had been allocated to 8 Field Artillery Brigade as his expertise was in the area of gunnery



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

PB0566

Troops boarding HMAT *Medic*, Port Melbourne 20 May 1916 (AWM PB0566)



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

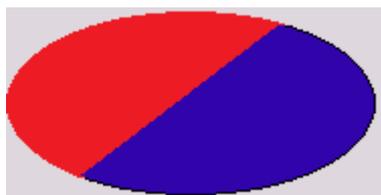
PB0572

HMAT *Medic* leaving Melbourne, December 1916

(AWM PB0572)

It is interesting to note that David is listed on the Christ Church Essendon Roll of Honour as a member of the congregation. Whether he lived in the Essendon district after arriving in Australia before going to Duntroon, or stayed there briefly after enlisting and then sailing for England, we do not know. Whatever the reason, it gives him a connection to the district and a right to be recognised along with other volunteers from the area. His name is also on the roll of honour for St. John the Baptist Church in Reid, ACT.

3 Division sailed via the Cape of Good Hope to avoid German submarines in the Mediterranean. The men arrived in Plymouth on 18 July and then headed for Lark Hill on Salisbury Plain to undergo intensive training. The Hughes government had created 3 Division to be a model one: fully trained and distinctive, unlike the only partly trained other divisions that suffered so terribly in the assaults at Fromelles and Pozières that same month, and at Gallipoli before that. In fact, the men of 3 Division were so distinctive that those in other units called them, rather derisively, the 'Lark Hill Lancers'. They were easy to distinguish because of the oval-shaped unit patches on their sleeves (many Gallipoli veterans referred to them as the 'eggs-a-cook', an Egyptian egg-seller's call, because of their oval-shaped patches) and the fact that Monash would not let them wear the brims of their slouch hats pinned up on one side (much to the chagrin of many of them!).



8 FAB shoulder patch  
([rslvirtualwarmemorial.org.au](http://rslvirtualwarmemorial.org.au))

While at Lark Hill, David was given a temporary appointment to the position of adjutant of 23 FAB, and he held this important position when the brigade arrived in

France on the last day of 1916 – just in time to experience what was described as the worst winter in western Europe for forty years. Then, on 6 January, he was appointed to the same position in 8 FAB until 20 February, when he resumed his regimental duties. In January 1917, the army command decided to compress the number of artillery pieces available into a smaller number of units in order to save on regimental structures. The number of FABs in each division was reduced from three to two, and each battery's complement of eighteen-pounder field guns was increased from four to six (there were three eighteen-pounder batteries in 8 FAB and one 4.5 howitzer battery, comprising six guns).



PRG 1364/1/15

A group of 8 FAB officers sometime in early 1916, to judge by the variety of cap badges and the fact that the men still do not have shoulder colour patches. An eighteen-pounder gun can be seen. It is interesting to note that the officer on the far left of the picture bears a striking resemblance to David as pictured at the top of this story. (State Library of South Australia)

At the same time as his unit was posted to France, David authorised a *per diem* payment of ten shillings from his salary, to be paid to Miss Clara German of Okehampton, Devon from 1 January 1917. Just what his relationship with this woman was is uncertain. However, given that *per diem* means 'per day', ten shillings was no small amount in 1917 terms, and may well have represented a substantial part of his daily pay. Whether she was a fiancée, official or otherwise, we do not know. Nevertheless, the sum was substantial enough for us to believe that the relationship between them was a close one.

Being new to the exigencies and dangers of modern industrial war, 3 Division was initially located in the so-called 'nursery sector', near the town of Armentières in northern France. 8 FAB headquarters was situated at Strazeele, west of Armentières. The brigade undertook training procedures during January and into February. On the eleventh of February, David travelled to the town of Tilques to undertake a course at the 2 Army Artillery School. When he returned on the nineteenth of the month, he

resumed regimental duties at the brigade headquarters and stayed there until 16 March, when he was transferred to 31 battery. Whether this was to cater for a consequential shortage of officers in that battery we do not know, but the point should be made that, nursery sector or not, the brigade was in an active fire zone and batteries were prime targets for their enemy counterparts. They may have been located behind the front lines but they were still in range of enemy guns and aerial bombardments, so casualties among the gunners were quite common. David may well have been filling the shoes of a man wounded or killed in action.

On 10 April 1917, 3 Division and its supporting units began moving north into Belgium. The British commander-in-chief, Sir Douglas Haig, had by this time despaired of making any further useful gains in the Somme Valley (the scene of a major battle in 1916) and decided instead to return to the old 1914 and 1915 battlefields around the town of Ypres and concentrate on capturing the German submarine bases on the occupied Belgian coast and demoralising the German forces in the process. The first target of the attack was the occupied village of Passchendaele. Before that, however, a strategic German-held ridge near the town of Messines had to be occupied. The first forces were gathered at Ploegsteert, near that town. 8 FAB arrived there on 11 April. Naturally, the Germans suspected that something was up and concentrated artillery and small arms fire at the forces as they arrived and attempted to settle in. It may have been because of another consequential gap in the ranks that David was transferred to 29 battery on the seventeenth, to take up the special position of battery sergeant-major (he still kept his substantive rank of lieutenant). Certainly, deaths were occurring at this time. On 21 April, a sergeant and driver were wounded and two days later another sergeant was killed and a gunner wounded.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E00920

Eighteen-pounders of 14 battery in action near Ypres, September 1917.  
(AWM E00920)

8 FAB stayed at Ploegsteert for the month of May. At the end of the month, it was ordered to do a 'sprinkling' bombardment at Messines in order to damage the Germans' approach to Messines and practice barrage techniques before the major attack, planned for 7 June. 29 battery took part in this program from the second to the

fifth of the month. On 4 and 5 June, each battery was allotted 900 rounds and ordered to expend the whole lot in a sustained barrage.

For a number of months, the British had been digging tunnels under the ridge at Messines and building up huge stores of explosives in them. They intended to set these twenty 'mines' off to mark the beginning of the Third Battle of Ypres, the intention being to nonplus the Germans, kill many of them, and seize the strategic ridge. While not knowing about the mines, the Germans, of course, had not been sitting idle while these preparations were going on. They had detected some regrouping of the British divisions, and were curious as to what was happening. As a result, they staged a number of raids on the Australian lines in May. In addition, they bombarded the area around Ploegsteert Wood, where 3 Division was based, with gas shells on a number of occasions. However, it was apparent on 7 June that the Germans had no idea about the mining operations and the British plans. Following the preparatory bombardment of the German lines on the ridge during the previous seven days, nineteen of the mines were detonated at 3.10 am on the morning of 7 June. Approximately 400 000 kilograms of TNT exploded over a period of forty-five seconds. At that stage, it was the largest man-made explosion in history. As Les Carlyon has described it,

One hundred and thirty miles away Londoners heard it as a distant roar. Fifteen miles to the east German soldiers in Lille ran in panic, fearing an earthquake. Buildings swayed and window glass fell into the streets. Perhaps 10, 000 Germans died as the mines went up, some of them simply atomised. The earth trembled, a wave of hot air ran up the ridge and beyond, black clouds of dust and smoke rolled over the German rear positions and blotted out the light of the sinking moon, craters hundreds of feet wide opened up and the sky rained clods of Flemish clay. The Germans who survived were half-mad and wanted to surrender.

The guns of 8 FAB also went into action at 3.10 am, providing a creeping barrage behind which the troops of 3 Division and others were able to move forward. The Germans replied in kind, and one of 31 battery's guns was knocked out by a gas shell at 3.43 am. At 6.48 am, 29 battery suffered its first casualties when a lieutenant and a gunner were wounded. The fight and associated barrages went on all day and the cease fire was only given at just before 11.00 pm that night. The 'stunt' was a huge success, up to ten thousand Germans being killed, the ridge being completely occupied and three kilometres of territory being gained. The action has been described as one of the great set-piece victories of the war. However, the cost was great: 6 806 Australian casualties.

After Messines, the Germans conducted a strategic retreat to more defensible lines and dug in there. 3 Division and its component parts remained at Messines, being involved in minor skirmishes with their German counterparts and training for their inevitable involvement in the major conflict to the north, which began on 31 July. At the end of August, 8 FAB moved into rest at Thiembonne in northern France. On 9 September it returned to the wagon lines at Dickebusch, and began firing the next day. The forces of 2 Anzac Corps, to which 3 Division belonged, took part in limited operations until late in the month. One of the main reasons for the limitations was the atrocious weather (which began, significantly, on 31 July, the first day of the major attack). The incessant rain turned the naturally marshy land around Ypres into a quagmire, impassable in many places. Men, materiel, horses, donkey and mules were

either bogged down or they completely disappeared in what Leon Wolff has described as the ‘gluey, intolerable mud’. There was some progress, however. On 20 September, during a short period of fine weather, 1 Anzac Corps took part in a successful ‘bite and hold’ attack along the Menin Road, east of Ypres, advancing around 1 200 metres – but at the cost of 5 000 casualties. On the twenty-sixth, with the sun still shining, other units of 1 Anzac Corps staged a successful attack on Polygon Wood, taking about five and a half square kilometres of territory – but this time at a cost of 5 400 casualties.



(Gibbs: *From Bapaume to Passchendaele* 1917)

Then it was 2 Anzac Corps’ turn. An attack had been planned for Broodseinde Ridge, near Zonnebeke. Official historian Charles Bean describes this step in the offensive as being the most important one. Since its abandonment by the British during the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915, this ridge had formed the main buttress of the German position in the area. From it, the Germans were able to look out on the British front in practically all directions. Capture this ridge, the allied planners believed, and their troops could sweep across it to Passchendaele.

8 FAB moved forward and into line on 30 September and began carrying out practice barrages. By 3 October, the weather had broken again, and conditions were appalling. On that day, before the attack planned for the morrow, the brigade lost four men killed, fifteen wounded and sixteen evacuated sick. The main attack began across a narrow front near Zonnebeke at 6.00 am on the fourth. The troops had to cross a veritable bog to advance because the preliminary bombardment had destroyed most of the existing tracks. However, advance they did, achieving their initial objective on 5 October. By that time, however, David was dying. He was probably struck in the chest by a shell splinter on the fourth. He was evacuated to 2 Canadian Clearing Station in preparation for a move to a field hospital in the rear, but succumbed to his wounds at 8.45 pm on the fifth.

1 Anzac Corps went on to capture the ridge, but at a cost of 6 432 casualties. The troops had advanced about two kilometres. 3 Division was then at the centre of the attack on Passchendaele, which began on 9 October. Fought in appalling conditions, it was an abject failure. When Canadian troops did finally capture the village on 10 November, the Third Battle of Ypres had already been deemed a failure.

David was buried in Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery, near the town of Poperinghe. His parents were granted a pension of twenty-two shillings per fortnight, payable from January 1918. Clara in Devon would receive her *per diem* payment no longer.



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

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