

Tin miner shelled in Peronne

Peter McLady

GEORGE Alexander and James Scott were two Scots in their mid-thirties when they enlisted in the in 1916.

They were good friends, business partners and they ended up being killed only three weeks apart in the same region in France.

George was a tin miner and landowner before he enlisted in Warwick in March 1916. George and James owned the Wylie Creek Tin Dredging Syndicate. James enlisted five months after George.

They joined the Australian Machine Gun Corps and fought on the Western Front in France and Belgium.

They were killed in action near Peronne in August-September 1918. Both men are remembered with honour on the Stanthorpe War Memorial.

George was born at Peterhead, Aberdeenshire, Scotland to Charles and Mary Alexander on June 4, 1880. For his service record, George said he was a miner and had also worked for six years for Peterhead-based chemist James Simpson as a dispenser.

He owned two agricultural selections at Mallow, near Stanthorpe. George enlisted in Warwick on March 25, 1916, giving his age as 34, although he was less than three months short of his 36th birthday. George departed Melbourne on active service aboard *HMAT Hororata* on 23 November, arriving in Plymouth, England, on 29 January 1917.

George trained at Pernham Downs on the Salisbury Plain where he joined the 4th Divisional Machine Gun Company.

Shortly after arriving there, George was found guilty of being absent without leave between April 1-3. He was confined to barracks for 14 days and forfeited three days' pay.

Following three months training George departed Folkestone, England, for the battlefields of France and Belgium on May 11. At Camiers, France, the base depot of the Australian Machine Gun Corps, he joined the 22nd Australian Machine Gun Company (MGC).

The 22nd MGC was attached to the 2nd Infantry Division. In April and early May the 22nd MGC had been heavily involved in the Battle of Bullecourt and had incurred significant casualties. When George joined the 22nd MGC it was in a training area at Bouzincourt, near Albert, on the Somme, before moving to another training area near Bancourt.

In August, while at Arques, the men were inspected twice within a week: in a march past by General William Birdwood and again, the following week, in a ceremonial parade by Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig, who according to the War Diary

of the 22nd MGC "expressed himself as very satisfied with the turnout and appearance of the men" (AWM, 1917).

On September 11, the 22nd MGC arrived at Ypres to join the fighting in the Battle of Passchendaele. They were in position at the top of the Westhoek Ridge, supporting the 1st and 2nd Divisions as they led the attack in the Battle of Menin Road.

Again the 22nd MGC was called into action on October 3 when at Zonnebeke in readiness for the Battle of Broodseinde Ridge. The War Diary states that in the move to the front line, one other rank was wounded.

George's service record says he suffered shrapnel wounds to his right shoulder and ear on October 3. After being admitted to hospital in Boulogne, George was transferred to England for further treatment. He spent more than two months recovering in hospital near Oxford before being discharged on December 18.

“He was a brilliant, successful and good living man

— Mother, Mary Alexander

George was granted furlough until January 1918 when he had to report to Sutton Veyn on Salisbury Plain. During this time he apparently travelled to Scotland.

Upon returning to the training camp on the Salisbury Plains, George joined the Australian Training Brigade at Longbridge Deverill. He trained with the British Army Machine Gun Corps at Grantham, Lincolnshire. In early 1918, when the Australian Machine Gun Corps was restructured, the 22nd MGC joined the newly formed 2nd Machine Gun Battalion.

On March 28, George rejoined the 22nd MGC as it moved into position in the front line and support areas near Baizieux on the Somme. One week earlier, the German forces had launched the massive Spring offensive known as Operation Michael and had broken through the Allied lines.

A section from the 22nd MGC joined the successful Australian-led attack on Le Hamel on July 4. The War Diary noted that six tanks attached to the 6th Brigade AIF played a daring part in the attack. The tanks were positioned to the rear of the infantry until they moved forward when the infantry were held up "and on each occasion with wonderful ease dispersed the enemy".

The Battle of Amiens was launched on August 8, to the east of Villers-Bretonneux, when 100,000 Allied troops attacked along a front of 20km. The 22nd MGC was



RESPECT: A wreath is laid for Stanthorpe's George Alexander at the Australian National Memorial, Villers-Bretonneux, France. PHOTOS: PETER MCLADY

allotted to the 7th Brigade for the attack. The Allies broke through the German lines and by the end of the day had captured 13,000 German prisoners and 200 field guns. The 22nd MGC re-entered the fighting on August 28 when it attacked enemy positions at the Somme Canal running south from Peronne. The War Diary of the 22nd MGC stated in the fighting between 28 and 31 August, 2nd Lieutenant Foley and eight other ranks were wounded and one other rank was killed (AWM, 1918).

Private George Alexander was killed in action on August 30, 1918. The Officer Commanding, 2nd Australian Machine Gun Battalion, wrote, "He was killed in action by shell fire

while exploiting a forward area between Herbecourt and Somme Canal. He was buried by members of this Unit and a cross was erected over the grave."

Originally, George left his shares in the Wylie Creek Tin Dredging Syndicate and his two agricultural selections at Mallow to his friend and business partner, James Scott, who was serving with the 12th Machine Gun Company. However, in April 1918, George amended his will, now leaving his estate to Mary Jane Benzie, of 47 Tullibody Road, Alloa, Scotland. George may well have met Mary Jane while on leave in Scotland in December 1917. George's personal effects containing a wallet, photos, cards, rosary,



Members of the 22nd Machine Gun Company, near Bullecourt. PHOTO: AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

and a religious book were sent to Mary Jane in November 1918. The Memorial Plaque and Memorial Scroll for George were sent to his mother. For the Roll of Honour, his mother wrote: "He was a brilliant, successful and good living man. Seriously wounded and came to England and as soon as he

was well enough he persisted in returning to the fighting line." Unfortunately the location of Private George Alexander's grave near Peronne was lost. Therefore, his name is recorded with honour on the wall of the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux, France.