

Private lasts 11 days on the war frontline

Fitzgerald lost to Passchendaele hell

■ Peter McLady

JAMES Fitzgerald, of Bundaberg, was working as a stockman on Pikedale Station, near Stanthorpe, before he enlisted to fight in the First World War.

His sister, Ellen, also worked at Pikedale Station, which was owned by CF White.

James was on the frontline only 11 days before he was killed in action during the Battle of Passchendaele on October 14, 1917 – nearly 100 years ago to the day.

James was born in Normanton, Queensland, on August 24, 1895, and grew up around Bundaberg and Rockhampton. He was the youngest of six children born to Jeremiah and Julia Fitzgerald, who were originally from County Carlow, Ireland. The Fitzgerald family was living at Bundaberg when James enlisted in Warwick on October 16, 1916.

Before enlisting, James worked on Pikedale Station together with his sister Ellen.

The owner of Pikedale Station, CF White, took a leading role in organising the building of the original Stanthorpe War Memorial.

According to research by local historian Enid Hamilton, public meetings were held as early as February 1919 to discuss the location and construction of a suitable memorial. It was a motion proposed by CF White that determined which soldiers would be entitled to have their names placed on the proposed memorial.

The motion was: “That the names to be placed on the memorial should include all men who enlisted from the Stanthorpe Shire, men who left the shire to enlist and were accepted and men whose parents

resided in the shire when the said men enlisted.”

Despite the efforts and generosity of such benefactors as CF White, it took until February 1926 for the Stanthorpe War Memorial to be completed and then unveiled by Major General Sir William Glasgow, who was commander of the 1st Division AIF and following the First World War was elected to the Australian Senate, representing Queensland, from 1919–1931.



“The air was filled with a dull roar and a scene such as Dante in his Inferno could not have imagined was unfolded.”

— The Forty-First

At the age of 21 years and two months, James Fitzgerald joined the 18th reinforcements of the 26th Battalion and left Sydney on active service aboard HMAS Demosthenes on December 23, 1916. He arrived in Plymouth, England, on March 5, 1917, and travelled on to the Rolleston training camp on the Salisbury Plain.

While at the Rolleston camp, James transferred to the 41st Battalion, joining his

older brother Thomas who enlisted in January 1917.

Thomas was awarded the Military Medal for bravery in the field in March 1918 and returned safely to Australia in October 1919. James and Thomas left England together to join their battalion on the Western Front on August 21, 1917.

In late August 1917, the 41st Battalion was located in the village of Assinghem, in Northern France, where the men were billeted in an old paper mill. Members of the battalion’s intelligence staff, who wrote the book *The Forty-First*, described the basic living conditions experienced by the men:

“The billets were clean, perhaps rather cold, being of stone, but on straw being supplied the men settled down in fair comfort.” (MacGibbon 1919, 57).

The 41st Battalion spent the next month at Assinghem, preparing for the major battle the men expected was ahead of them but, as yet, they had no details. The battalion carried out practice attacks in open and semi-open warfare, finishing with a customary bayonet attack.

The 41st Battalion did not have to wait long for the battle they were anticipating. On October 3, the battalion moved by train to Ypres, in Belgium Flanders, where the infamous Battle of Passchendaele was in full swing. The following day the Australian 3rd Division formed the centre of an Allied attack that became known as the Battle of Broodseinde Ridge. The 41st Battalion, as part of the 3rd Division, attacked along the Ypres to Zonnebeke Railway to its south and the New Zealand Division to the north.

The Anzac-led attack on



RIP: Private James Fitzgerald's resting place at Tyne Cot Cemetery. PHOTOS: CONTRIBUTED

the morning of October 4 was graphically described in the book, *The Forty-First*:

“Rain commenced to fall steadily. In waterlogged shell-holes, all longed for the hour of action to arrive. Prompt to the second, at 6am. the British barrage dropped with the sound of thunder. Perhaps never in the history of this war was there such a concentration of artillery in one place as in the Ypres salient at this period. It was impossible to pick out the sound of any one gun; the air was filled with a dull roar, and a scene such as Dante in his ‘Inferno’ could not have imagined was unfolded. Stretching away on both flanks, further than the eye could see, was nothing but pulsating waves of red and white and purple, belching forth a whirlwind of death in front of our advancing infantry. After three minutes of this – Furies let loose – the gathering of troops along the front moved forward, and we with them.

The attack commenced in darkness. In the Hades, all recognised formations went by the board, and “columns of lumps” picked their way forward, recking nought [not taking heed] of casualties caused by the enemy barrage (MacGibbon 1919, 62).”

The 41st Battalion went on to capture its objectives and, despite repeated German counter attacks, held the line until relieved by the 66th British Division on the morning of October 6.

Following just three days rest, the 41st Battalion was once again called to the front line. On the afternoon of October 9, the battalion took up position on the ridge leading up to Passchendaele village where it encountered the most dire conditions.

On October 12, the 9th and 10th Brigade of the 3rd Division took part in the Anzac-led attack upon Passchendaele village. The treacherous conditions doomed the attack to failure and caused the 3rd Division

to suffer 3199 casualties.

On October 14, Pvt James Fitzgerald was killed in action between Augustus Wood and the Ravebeek, close to where Tyne Cot Cemetery is located today. Army records show the Reverend E. Morgan buried him. James lasted just 11 days.

On November 9, 1917, the Border Post reported that Ellen had received notice of his death: “Mrs W Truss (Pikedale) has received word that her brother, Private J.J. Fitzgerald was killed in action in France on October 14. The deceased soldier was 22 years of age and a member of the 41st Battalion. Mrs Truss also has another brother fighting in the same Battalion. Private Fitzgerald was in the employ of Mr CF White for two years, previous to his enlistment.”

Pvt James Fitzgerald is remembered on both the Stanthorpe and Bundaberg First World War Memorials.



Tyne Cot Cemetery, Belgium. The cemetery is located close to where Fitzgerald perished.



The village of Broodseinde where the Australian 3rd Division was part of an allied attack.