

Brothers go to battle together

■ Peter McLady

TWO Stanthorpe brothers, Michael and William O'Connor, enlisted within two days of one another to serve in the First World War.

Michael was 20 years old and the father of two young children, William was 22 and single.

Michael married Clarie Holman and they lived in Granite St, Stanthorpe. They had two daughters: Virginia and Joyce. Michael's parents, Stephen and Elizabeth O'Connor, as well as his brothers William and Stephen Jnr all lived in Stanthorpe.

Michael had been working as a labourer before he enlisted in Warwick on May 29, 1916. Two days later, William "Bill" O'Connor also enlisted in Warwick. Together they joined the 6th reinforcements of the 52nd battalion and went into training at the Enoggera Army Camp, near Brisbane.

Michael and William left Sydney on active service aboard HMAT Ceramic on October 7, disembarking in Plymouth, England, on November 21. After several weeks of further training, the brothers left England to join the fighting in France on December 28 aboard SS Princess Victoria.

On January 2, 1917, they joined the 52nd Battalion in the village of Vignacourt, about 17km north-west of Amiens.

In late February 1917, in northern France, as the German army moved back to the heavily fortified Hindenburg Line, the Germans fortified a number of villages and towns on the approaches to the Line. One such village was Noreuil where the Australian 13th Brigade attacked on April 2. In the lead up to the attack, the 52nd Battalion moved into the frontline at Lagnicourt on March 28. On that day, Bill received a gunshot wound to his left thigh. After treatment in hospital in Rouen, France, he was moved for further treatment to Graylingwell War Hospital, West Sussex, England.

Bill recovered and rejoined Michael and the 52nd Battalion on July 29.

By this time, Michael had fought in and survived the Battle of Messines.

According to the War Diary of the 52nd Battalion, on June 7, the battalion joined the attack at Messines, and with the support of tanks, captured and held its objective. The following day, a large group of German troops launched a counter-attack against the 52nd Battalion.

The diary noted that 20 bombers chased the German troops from their cover and, together with Lewis gunners and snipers, they continued the attack until there were no remaining German troops. Michael was lucky to escape unscathed at Messines as the 52nd Battalion suffered heavy



COSTLY BATTLE: The Battle of Passchendaele claimed many lives including those of Australian Corporals like Michael O'Connor.

PHOTOS: CONTRIBUTED



The city of Ypres in Belgium.

casualties in the battle: 69 men were killed and another 253 wounded or missing.

Michael was promoted to Lance Corporal on June 17. He attended the 2nd Anzac Bombing School in July and was promoted again to Corporal on August 17. On August 30, while in the frontline at Neuve Eglise, near Messines, Michael was wounded in action.

He suffered a shrapnel wound to his lower back and was admitted to the 53rd General Hospital in Boulogne. After spending some days in a rest camp, Michael rejoined the 52nd Battalion on September 16.

The 52nd was called to the frontline on October 10 to join the attack against the village of Passchendaele.

Neville Browning wrote in his book, *The 52nd Battalion AIF*:

"Allied artillery was particularly active throughout the day of October 17 with field guns and howitzers firing counter-battery shoots and bombarding the enemy front line and communication

routes. Aeroplanes engaged on artillery spotting were constantly over the enemy lines, correcting the fall of shot from the howitzers. The enemy retaliated and fired a barrage over the entire front and killed eight other ranks from the 52nd Battalion and wounded 28, including Lieutenant Denne" (Browning 2005, 167).

Corporal Michael O'Connor was one of the eight men from the 52nd Battalion killed on this day. Michael has no known grave but his name is recorded with honour on the wall of the Menin Gate Memorial at Ypres, Belgium.

The Stanthorpe Border Post reported Michael's death on November 16:

"The news which was wired from the Base Records Office, Melbourne, on Friday last, of the death of Corporal Michael Joseph O'Connor, who was killed in action in France on October 17, was received on all sides with the deepest regret.

"The deceased was only 19 years of age at the time of his death, and for his young

wife and two young children, as well as for his parents, Mr and Mrs Stephen O'Connor, and other relatives the greatest sympathy will be felt.

"Corporal MJ O'Connor enlisted in Stanthorpe on May 29, 1916, and was attached to the 52nd Battalion. He was not long in camp before he proceeded to Melbourne and thence to England and to France, where he has been fighting for some considerable time. "He had risen to the rank of Corporal and he no doubt would have risen in the ranks had he been spared.

"He has paid the supreme sacrifice in the defence of his country, and the sympathy of all will go to his sorrowing relatives. The sad news was conveyed to his wife and parents by the Rev Father Ryan."

By October 1919, Clarie O'Connor had left Stanthorpe and moved with her daughters to Station St, Auburn, Sydney. Clarie received Michael's Memorial Scroll and Memorial Plaque at this address. However, the



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Army was unable to locate Clarie in late 1923 when they attempted to send her Michael's Victory Medal. The medal was returned unclaimed and Michael's file was marked as "untraceable".

Bill was not with Michael when he was killed in action on October 17, 1917 as he had been taken ill on October 13 and admitted to hospital.

He returned to his battalion on October 22 to discover his brother had been killed.

Bill continued to serve with 52nd Battalion until it was disbanded in May 1918, when he transferred to the 49th Battalion. On September 15, Bill was fighting in the Jeancourt area, between Peronne and Saint-Quentin, when he was wounded again.

He suffered a gunshot wound to the left arm and neck and another wound to his right shoulder and was transferred for treatment to hospital in Bristol, England.

Bill recovered from his wounds and while waiting to return to Australia following

the end of the war, was stationed on the Salisbury Plain.

On January 28, 1919, he was admitted to the No.1 Australian Dermatological Hospital, Wiltshire, suffering from pneumonia. Bill was reported as being dangerously ill on February 12, but survived, finally being discharged from hospital on March 13. Bill was invalided home and arrived in Australia aboard HMAT Marathon on June 11.

Local Stanthorpe resident Roy Werner recalls that Bill was well known around Stanthorpe.

Roy worked at Pierpoint's store and remembers Bill would come into town on pension day for provisions and his favourite Penfold's wine.

At the time, Bill was living in a tent at the bottom of Lee's Mountain, south of Stanthorpe, and was suffering from the trauma he experienced during the war. There wasn't any support for returned servicemen like Bill and so, like many others, he was left alone to suffer the debilitating effects of what is known today as post-traumatic stress disorder.