



INTO BATTLE: Private Neil McMillan was part of the 6th reinforcement for the 42nd Battalion, 1916.

PHOTO: QLDPICS

# Life lost in Passchendaele

## High-explosive shell takes Private McMillan's life

PRIVATE Neil McMillan of Stanthorpe had been married nearly four months when he left Australia to fight on the Western Front in September, 1916.

After training in England, Neil joined the fighting at the Battle of Passchendaele. He fought in the Battles of Menin Road, Polygon Wood, and Broodseinde Ridge and helped defend Amiens in April, 1918.

But a high-explosive shell killed Neil while he was in a front line trench near Villers-Bretonneux on June 10, 1918.

Mystery surrounds where Neil is buried. Conflicting reports have him buried both in the field where he fell and in the Vaux-sur-Somme Cemetery.

Despite the uncertainty, Private Neil McMillan is remembered by a special memorial in Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery, France.

Neil married Sarah Ellen "Poppy" Blair, an 18-year-old waitress, of Stanthorpe on May 29, 1916, at "Camelot", South Brisbane.

Her mother Florence gave her consent for the marriage as Poppy's father, Thomas, had died. Neil had taken leave from army training for the wedding.

Neil was born at Myrtleford, Victoria, the son of William and Martha McMillan.

He attended public school at Yackandandah, where he lived with his parents. Before enlisting, Neil worked as a miner and his service record reveals he was also a billiard marker.

A billiard marker worked in a billiards hall where he attended to the players and sometimes kept score.

On December 7, 1915, in Warwick, Neil enlisted in the A.I.F. He was 28-years-old. In February 1916, he joined the 42nd Battalion and on August 26, at the Enoggera Camp, he transferred to the 5th Reinforcements of the 49th Battalion.

On September 19, nearly four months after his wedding, Neil departed Brisbane on active service aboard *HMAT Seang Choon*.

He arrived in Plymouth, England, on December 9 and went into training at Codford on the Salisbury Plain.

He was promoted to acting corporal on March 8, 1917, but reverted to private after a stay in hospital. Neil arrived in France on June 13 to join his battalion fighting on the front line.

The 49th Battalion was moving constantly between reserve lines and training areas near Armentieres, in northern France. The battalion took its turn holding the front line but was mainly training for the upcoming Battle of Passchendaele. The 49th Battalion entered the fighting in the days following the Battle of Menin Road on September 22. A few days later, as part of the A.I.F. 4th Division, the 49th Battalion led the attack in the Battle of Polygon Wood. Neil did well to escape the battle uninjured as the Australian troops suffered 5785 casualties, including 112 men from the 49th Battalion



MEMORIAL: Neil McMillan's place of burial is unknown. PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

(Cranston 1983, 32). The battalion then fought in the Battle of Broodseinde Ridge before in mid-November, "marching back to Aigneville which was the furthest back from the fighting the battalion had been for some twelve months" (Cranston 1983, 34). The battalion remained in rest areas where training continued until it moved back to the front line in February, 1918. With the breakthrough of the German forces during Operation Michael in March, the 49th Battalion was ordered to hold the line at the village of Hebuterne.

The Australians successfully defended against the German attack but again the cost was high – the 49th Battalion suffered 221 casualties.

On Anzac Day 1918, the 49th Battalion joined the counter-attack to recapture the village of Villers-Bretonneux. The village had been lost the previous day to a German attack that involved both tanks and poison gas. The battalion, fighting as part of the A.I.F. 13th Brigade,



TRIBUTE: A special message left next to the headstone. PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

together with the 15th Brigade, forced the Germans to withdraw or surrender (Cranston 1983, 46). "In this action, British casualties were estimated at 12,429 and Australian losses at 2473" (Cranston 1983, 49). Neil again survived the fighting, but his luck was about to run out.

Private Neil McMillan was killed in action on June 10, 1918.

Some statements in Neil's Red Cross File give details surrounding his death. Private James MacDonald told the Red Cross:

"On June 10th 1918 in the trenches at a village near Villers Bretonneux, the Germans were shelling and a shell dropped in the trench killing McMillan and another man, named H.G. Jones [sic] instantly. McMillan was hit on the head. I was only a few yards away at the time and saw McMillan and Jones [sic] both lying dead in the trench. I cannot say where the bodies were buried, but they were taken out of the trench. The ground was held. There was another man of the same name in the

battalion. Description – about 5ft.8ins, fair complexion. Called him 'Mac'."

Sergeant Ronald Ogilvie said:

"He was in D Coy. 15th Platoon; 5ft.8ins, fair, thick set, and about 30 years of age. He was a married man. At Sailly-le-Sec, on June 10th 1918 at 8pm, we were holding the line when a shell killed McMillan instantly, and Turner H.G. 2025. They were buried together at place of casualty on battlefield, but graves were allotted to them and crosses were erected to their memory at Vaux Military Cemetery. I saw the crosses."

Sergeant Thomas Phillips made the following statement regarding Neil McMillan and Harold Turner:

"At Sailly-le-Sec about June 10th they were killed. I was about 200 yards in the rear of them and although I did not see them actually killed I know that they were buried in the open close to where they fell just by what then was our front line. Cpl. Stewart, 49th Bn. D. Coy. buried them and if you write to him I am sure you can get details."

Just where Neil is buried is uncertain. His service record states that he was buried at Vaux-sur-Somme Communal Cemetery Extension, 1 3/4 miles north-east of Corbie, France. However, statements in Neil's Red Cross file suggest he may have been buried in the field, and that a grave and cross were erected in his memory at Vaux-sur-Somme. Similar statements are contained in the Red Cross File for Corporal Harold Turner.

The uncertainty continued in October 1923, when Army

Base Records wrote to Poppy McMillan:

"... in addition to the Special Collective Cross erected in the Villers Bretonneux Military Cemetery to commemorate the names of your husband and six other soldiers of the British Empire who were originally buried in the Vaux-sur-Somme Communal Cemetery Extension (which was later destroyed by the enemy), a separate permanent memorial will also be erected to the memory of each of the soldiers concerned, and on which will be engraved the full regimental description together with the personal inscription furnished by the next-of-kin."

According to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery was made after the end of the war when graves were brought in from other burial grounds and battlefields in the area.

The epitaph on Private Neil McMillan's headstone says:

"In Memory of My Husband Who Gave His Life For His Country."

The stone memorial in the row of special headstones including Neil's reads:

"To The Memory Of These 15 Soldiers Of The British Empire Who Fell in 1918 And Were Buried At The Time In The Communal Cemetery Extensions Of Lamotte-En-Santerre And Vaux-Sur-Somme And in Dury Hospital Military Cemetery But Whose Graves Are Now lost Their Glory Shall Not Be Blotted Out."