REMINISCENCES OF WORLD WAR ONE BY ALFRED SMITH

Mr. Alfred Smith worked in the coalmines of the Illawarra for most of his working years. Beginning as a contract miner at the coal-face he eventually rose to the position of mine manager. In 1916 he was living in Thirroul from where he enlisted. These are thus memories of a local man and his experiences in the ‘war to end all wars’.

I enlisted for military service at the Army Training camp in the Showground at Kiama on the first of November, 1916.

I was told my Unit would be the 5th Reinforcement of the 45th Battalion, which is now in France.

After a few days in the camp at Kiama, living in a tent, I and the other men of the same unit were transferred to Liverpool Military Camp which was the main training camp of New South Wales.

I was given what was called final leave and then we, with other troops, embarked on a ship called the Beltana. We sailed the same day. Leaving Sydney 25/11/1916 at 2.00 p.m. There were about 600 troops aboard.

The S.S. Beltana was a cargo vessel which had been taken over by the army.

The holds, which usually carried the cargo had been cleaned out and a number of long tables of planks had been bolted to the floor. Also hooks had been fastened to the ceiling. We slung our hammocks to these hooks. Each table seated 20 men. I don’t know how many hammocks there were.

Each day two different men from each table had to go to the cook-house, get the food, and serve it to the men at their own table.

The food was alright for young healthy men except that it was the same every day.

We had an epidemic of some sort. I forget now what it was but eight men died on the journey from Sydney to England. We had physical exercise every day. But except for guard duty now and then, the troops had nothing to do.

Fortunately the weather was mostly fine.

After leaving Sydney we called in to Melbourne where we embarked some more troops.

I think our stay in Melbourne was short. I haven’t any record of it. We did not go ashore.

After leaving Melbourne, I think the intention was to go straight on to Africa.

We passed Albany at 5 am. on the 2nd December and were headed for the Indian Ocean. The next afternoon a fire was discovered in the baggage. The ship changed course, and the troops were told we were heading for Fremantle.

We arrived off Fremantle about mid-day the next day (the 3rd) and pulled into the wharf on the 4th December, 1916. We were all disembarked and taken to a place called Claremont, about half-way between Fremantle and Perth.

We were put into camp in the Showground at Claremont. That night I was put on picket duty in Perth. I arrived back at camp about midnight, and the next morning about 8.30 we set off for Fremantle. We arrived at Fremantle at 10.30 am and went straight on to the ship.

None of us had much previous training and we were very tired. I had blisters on my feet. However, we were pleased to get aboard the ship, which sailed shortly after we all were aboard, 6th December, 1916.
We had a good run across the Indian Ocean to Durban where we arrived about 7.00 p.m. on the 21st December, 1916. Next morning, the 22nd, we were marched through the town and back to the ship. We were allowed shore-leave in the afternoon. I, with another man, had a good look around the town. We got talking to a local man (Mr. Currie) and he invited us to his home for dinner, which we accepted. However, we had to fall in at the Post Office at 10.30 p.m. and were marched back to the ship.

23rd December, 1916. We left Durban this morning about 8.00 a.m. for Cape Town which we reached on the 26th. That meant we had Christmas Day 1916 on board the ship S.S. Beltana between Durban and Cape Town. We did have some Christmas cheer and change of menu. The ship arrived in the morning of the 26th and the troops were allowed ashore after lunch, back on board at 11.00 p.m. We did have some time to look around Durban and Cape Town. I found both places very interesting.

27th December, 1916. The ship left Cape Town about 6.00 p.m. And, although we were heading for the war zone, every one seemed to be happy to be on the move again.

When we left Cape Town we thought we were headed for England. But on the morning of the 3rd January, 1917, we anchored off the island of St. Elena.

4th January, 1917. We left St. Elena today about mid-day. During the time we stayed there we were anchored a mile or more off shore. We could see the town, the shore was very high cliffs, and there was no surface communication between the shore and the ship.

8th January, 1917. We crossed the equator sometime today and buried two men.

19th January 1917. Another unexpected stop, we arrived at Free Town, Sierra Leone. We anchored out from the shore. We could see the town at some distance. Three or four of our men went ashore on some duty but the rest of us stayed on the ship.

Several canoes of natives, came out to the ship. Some coins were thrown from the ship into the water. The men dived for them. I don’t think they missed many. The men were stark naked. The women wore loose fitting dresses, they all looked pretty primitive.

14th January, 1917. We left Free Town early this morning. When we got out to sea we joined seven other ships. Some were transports like ourselves, and one looked like an armoured passenger liner. We formed a convoy, guarded by the armed ship.

When we left Free Town we were in the submarine zone. From then nothing of note happened and we were approaching colder climates.

About a week before we reached England we had very cold weather. We left Sydney in the summer and in about two months were in the winter. Two or three days before reaching land, six small naval ships came out and escorted us into harbour.

We landed at Plymouth on the 29th January.

We disembarked about 7.00 p.m. and boarded a train for camp. We did not know where we were going but there was snow all the way.

About one o'clock in the morning we arrived at the camp and found that we were at a small village called Codford, in Wiltshire.
We commenced training that day, later on I joined the camp band.
During my time in the band I went to several other towns including Salisbury. In every case to the funeral of some Australian soldier.

February 5th, 1917. A number of the new arrivals including myself and George Rogers went to London on four days disembarkment leave. George Rogers was my uncle-in-law. He had come over at the same time as me but on another ship and he was in another battalion, but in the same training camp. So we teamed up and spent our leave together.

Nothing of note happened in London. After we went to France we did not see each other again until he returned home after the war had ended.

Of course we were being drilled and trained every day. I left the band and on the 21st April I started on a course of Lewis machine gun training. That lasted a bit over a week. During that time I was on notice that I would be going to France with the next batch to go.

One very interesting thing (to me) happened during this period. On the 18th April all the able men at the camp at Codford were marched to a place called Bislfort. I don’t know the distance but it took us all day to get there, the purpose of the exercise was to be received by the King. It was claimed there were 40,000 Australian troops there that day on review. We stayed there overnight and returned to Codford the next day. Per foot.

But what I found interesting was that both going and returning we visited the famous Stonehenge.

May 2nd, 1917. Training over and we are now ready to go to France.
May 2nd, 1917. The "Draft" Codford at 10 p.m. by train and arrived at Folkstone at about 5 a.m. on the morning of the 3rd. We went to a rest-camp and stayed there until about 8 p.m. then we went to the harbour, got on the transport and sailed about 10 p.m. We arrived at Boulogne at 11.30 a.m. We were then marched to another rest-camp for the night. With some of the other soldiers I had a look around part of the town.

(To be continued next issue)
REMINISCENCES OF WORLD WAR ONE BY ALFRED SMITH

(continued from last issue)

Mr. Smith's account has told of how he and his comrades left Kiama, completed the voyage from Australia to England, and undertaken training in Wiltshire from 30 January until 2 May, 1917. The story broke off last issue just as Mr Smith sailed by transport to Boulogne-sur-Mer, the main base for British armies in World War One.

May 2nd, 1917. We arrived at Boulogne at 11.30 a.m. We were then marched to another rest-camp for the night. With some of the other soldiers I had a look around part of the town.

May 4th, 1917. We marched out of camp about 9.30 a.m. bound for Etaples, where we arrived about 6.00 p.m. Very tired. Etaples is about 18 miles south of Boulogne, and appears to be a depot for the British Army.

May 5th, 1917. We spent today being equipped with our rifles, bayonet steel helmet and gas masks (2).

May 6th, 1917. Still at Etaples. Today we went to what is called 'The Bullring' about four miles away. There, we had instructions on gas warfare and went through the gas chamber with our gas mask on.

May 7th, 1917. Left Etaples by train this morning for Albert. With moving about so much at this time I did not keep very good records, and now my memory is somewhat hazy on details.

However, on the way we saw a lot of damage that had been done to towns and villages in previous battles. We arrived at Albert about 5.00 p.m.

Albert was a fair sized town. But it had been badly damaged by German shelling. All the shop windows had been blown out and were lying about the streets.

Albert became rather well known during the war. There had been a statue of the Madonna and child on the church steeple. Somehow it had been displaced and was hanging half over the parapet.

We did not stay at Albert and left there about 9.00 p.m. to march to a village called Bresle. Arriving there about midnight. I joined the 45th Battalion this morning and have been billeted in a cow-shed. It had been cleaned out but it still smelt of cows. There were two other men with me. The troops are living in all sorts of places such as fowl-sheds, stables, cow-sheds etc.

May 14th, 1917. Marched out of Bresle this morning for a place called Dog-Leg Camp. Why the name I do not know. But it is the place from which the British started the big push in July, 1916.

May 15th, 1917. Entrained this evening. We are expecting to go to Belgium. Whatever train rides in France, until I was wounded, was always in a cattle truck.
We travelled all night. At about 10.00 a.m. the next day, 16th May, we arrived at Braillent and marched to a camp about a mile away. I don’t remember that one.

May 17th, Left camp about 5 p.m. and marched to Neuve-Eglise (New Church) in Belgium, a distance of about 5 miles. We are now in the danger zone of shells and gas.

This camp is a proper military camp. It is composed of A-tents for sleeping in. Eight men to each tent, cooking tents, offices etc.

It is situated just on the edge of Neuve-Eglise and about a mile from the front line.
Neuve-Eglie is a small village. The road that passes our camp passes through the village. In spite of the fact that the village is wrecked by shell-fire there were still people living there.

Military transport traffic on the road is very heavy. Every evening we see the villagers, laden down with luggage, getting away to the rear. The Germans shell the village every night but the people must come back the next day because we see them going again the next evening.

We have been putting in our time, mostly at night, unloading artillery shells from trains which come up behind our position on a railway line built by the army.

May 31st this morning we moved from the camp at Neuve-Eglis to a deserted farmhouse, about a mile away.

We are now sleeping in a hay-loft.

With all this shifting about, I cannot now remember where we had our meals.

June 6th. There was a very heavy allied artillery bombardment from 2.00 p.m. yesterday until late this morning. The Germans replied and blew up some shell-dumps not far away.

June 7th. About 3 a.m. all of us were wakened-up by a terrific noise. The whole hay-loft was shaking and our artillery was blazing away with every gun.

We later learned that the big noise and concussion had been caused by the detonation of 19 mines under the German trenches.

We had been warned a couple of days ago that we would be going to the front line today. So after breakfast we had lined up and marched off to the scene of action. We passed through what was the remains of the village of Messines. All that was standing was the remains of three walls of the church.

New Zealand troops had taken that part of the line during the night. We spent some time in the old trenches then we went over the ridge of the hill and spread ourselves about in shell-holes. There were plenty of those about. The artillery had kept the barrage going all day and the shells are falling about 300 yards ahead of us. We could not see any further than that because of the smoke and dust. One could not believe any German could be alive through all that bombardment. But I did see three or four who seemed to be on our side of the barrage. The barrage lifted and moved further forward into German territory. We got out of the shell-holes, lined up in Companies, and began to advance in open-order about two yards apart.

We had not taken many paces when men around began to fall. I was surprised because I did not think there would be any Germans left in position to see us.

I think we may have advanced about 200 yards when I was wounded. I felt a sting in the muscle of my right shoulder. I realised I had been hit but not incapacitated so I kept going. After a few more paces I got a heavy blow on the back of my neck. That knocked me to the ground. Jeff Mack saw me fall. He came across to me, had a look, and I am sure he was in the process of saying "It is not much Alf" when he dropped alongside of me. I lay for a couple of minutes then looked at Jeff and saw he was dead. I picked up my rifle and the ammunition that I was carrying for the Lewis gun and started forward and got another in my right shin. Down again I went.

After laying for a while I got up and again was promptly hit by another through the right elbow.
The bullets seemed to be coming from an angle on my right.
However, I knew I was out of the battle and jumped into a near-by shell-hole. There were already two wounded men in there. We all carried a first field dressing, a couple of bandages in our pocket. The other two men were more able than I was so they bandaged me up as best they could. Then we started for the rear.

When I got back to where the mines were exploded this morning, a soldier directed me to one of the mine craters. This I found to be a first-aid post. It was manned by a doctor and two first aid men. Other wounded were already there and others followed. I suppose there were 10 or 12 of us there at one time. After being attended to, I made my way through some of the old trenches, down the hill until I reached the bottom. I waited there awhile. An ambulance came along and took me to a dressing station.

After some attention there I was loaded on to another ambulance which transported me and others to the town of Bailluel. It was there about 2 o'clock next morning. I was taken to another dressing station. My arm was tied to a splint and I was given new dressings. I was then taken to the railway. There was no railway-station. Just the railway. There were some New Zealand troops there looking after the wounded. They fixed me up on a stretcher and I had a bit of a sleep.

June 8th, 1917. I got aboard the train at 8.00 a.m. The Germans had been shelling over us into the town all night and were still doing so. The train started to move about 10 o'clock when 2 shells fell right along-side the line and damaged the engine.

The damaged engine was replaced and finally we got away. We didn’t know where we were bound for but we arrived at Boulogne late in the morning, and went into a hospital. The hospital was a war time hospital, manned by English doctors and nurses. This is where I first saw some Americans. Some American doctors came to the hospital. My wounds were clean bullet holes and soon started to heal. My right elbow was the worst. It was fractured. X-ray.

June 14th, 1917. The hospital seemed to be a little way out of Boulogne. This afternoon I left the hospital and went to Boulogne and was put aboard a ship to go to England. We were supposed to sail that evening but we were held up by fog. During the night we could hear the sounds of the German bombs being dropped on Dover.

June 15th, 1917. Started this morning about ten o’clock for England. Arrived at Dover about 10.30 a.m. We were put on a train for Eastbourne where we arrived about 6 p.m. I was taken to a hospital called De Walden Court. The hospital was really a mansion that had been turned into a war-time hospital. A building had been erected in the garden. It was called the “Hut”. I was in the Hut. This hospital was manned by Auxillary Aid Detachment (V.A.D.) people. They were very good to us. I had a very pleasant stay at De Walden Court up to August 7th. My wounds healed and all the time I was there I was able to walk about the town and country-side. I was even able to have a swim in the sea a couple of times.

Before I left home at Thirroul, my father told me he had a brother in Cornwall. His brother was a policeman and he, my father, had not heard from his brother for about 25 years. He gave me his brother’s last known address, and asked me to try
and locate him.

While I was in the first camp, in England, I wrote to the officer in charge of the police station at the address I had been given by my father. I explained who I was and asked if anyone could give me information about my uncle or his family.

The officer wrote back and told me my uncle had retired from the Force and was living at Falmouth. And gave me the address. I then wrote to my uncle and introduced myself. We corresponded and while I was in hospital my Uncle invited me to visit him and his family when I was able. Of course I accepted that, and when I was discharged from hospital went to Cornwall.

August 7th, 1917. I was discharged from hospital today and went by train to London, arriving at Victoria Station about 3 p.m. I had to go to Army Headquarters at Houseferry Road to get my leave pass (10 days) and train pass. There I met Jack Simpson, a man in the same unit as me, and who came over on the same ship as me. He had been assigned to Headquarters duties. He was living with his mother at Highgate. I accepted his offer. I did not know where else to go. And I was very well received.

August 8th, 1917. I got a train from Paddington station at 10.15 a.m. Had a pleasant journey and arrived at Falmouth at 6.00 p.m. I was met at Falmouth station by my cousins who seemed delighted to see me as I was delighted to see them. They escorted me to the home of my uncle and aunt, where my two cousins also lived.

My relatives consisted of my uncle and aunt and their two daughters, Lilian and Violet, and Lilian's five year old daughter Kathleen. Lilian's husband was a school-teacher but he was in the British Army and was away in Egypt.

They all made me welcome, and took me about quite a bit. My uncle took me to Golant where he and my father lived in their youth. I was very pleased to go to Golant to see where my father had come from. I had a very enjoyable time in Cornwall.

August 26th, 1917. Somehow I knew I had to report to Weymouth today. Last night I had found somewhere to sleep so about 5.00 p.m. I boarded a train at Waterloo station for Weymouth. The reason for going to Weymouth is to go into a rest camp. The camp was about a mile or so out of Weymouth. I was directed where to go and arrived at the camp about 5.00 p.m.

There was nothing much to do at Weymouth camp. We had to attend a roll call in the morning, then, provided we did not go too far, we could wander about the countryside or go to the beach. It was an easy life, but it was beginning to get cold and we wanted to get on our way home.

October, 18th, 1917. The big day had arrived. We left Weymouth this morning by train about 7.30 a.m. for Plymouth on the way home. We arrived at Plymouth about one o'clock. We went straight onto the ship. And the ship was the Beltana. The same one on which I had gone to England. While waiting for the ship to sail I was able to have a look round the town.

October 20th, 1917. We sailed at Plymouth today at about 3.30 p.m. bound for Australia.

The whole trip back was uneventful. The sea was calm all the way.

We called in at Freetown, Cape Town, Fremantle and Melbourne. We stayed at each place for varying times.

At Fremantle some men for Western and south Australia disembarked, and at
Melbourne, Victorian and Tasmanian men disembarked.

December 13th. We arrived at Sydney early this morning. The Governor came aboard and gave us a welcome home. When I went ashore I was met by my wife and dad. We caught a train to Thirroul where I was met by the Thirroul Brass Band of which I was a member, then escorted to my home in Mountain Road, Austinmer, by a large group of people.

Discharged 17th January, 1918.

The above reminiscences were given to me by Mr. Smith for typing in 1987. Mr. Smith was then nearly 96 years of age and resident in Diment Towers, Wollongong. He was still extraordinarily alert and took a keen interest in current affairs.

I had a number of discussions with Mr. Smith and found him a fascinating man and I was constantly amazed at his powers of recall. He often remarked that he liked talking to young people because all the other people in the rest home did not possess his interest in the world.

Although he was older than most of the other residents of Diment Towers, Mr. Smith often remarked that he often felt younger because many of the other residents lacked his continuing interest in current affairs. Mr. Smith is still very much up to enjoying conversation and I feel sure would welcome any visits by members of the society who would like to learn from his remarkable experiences in the Illawarra dating back to about 1908.

The Society offers its heart-felt thanks to Mr. Smith for sharing his historically important memories with us. On behalf of the Society, I extend to him our best wishes.

ROBERT BROWN AT HAT HILL (MOUNT KEMBLA) 1804

Some controversy still exists as to whether Robert Brown, the noted nineteenth century naturalist, ever visited Illawarra. As Norm Robinson wrote in the I.H.S. Bulletin of August 1980:

"The type specimen of the Spine-tailed Log-runner is recorded as having been collected at Mount Kembla by Robert Brown in 1804. This was eleven years before Charles Throsby built his hut near Brighton Beach. The author has been unable to find any evidence that Brown actually visited the district. On the evidence available, it is probable that another person gave the specimen of this rain forest bird to him."

However, the Transactions of the Lennean Society for 1827 (Volume XV, p.294) record, with regards to the Spine-tailed Log-runner (scientific name Orthonyx temminckii):

"The Society's specimen was presented to them by Mr. Brown, who met with it near Hat Hill in the year 1804."

Whilst this evidence is clear enough in its statement that Brown had himself collected the specimen, unfortunately no contemporary record of the visit to Hat Hill in 1804 has come to light. In searching for corroborative testimony, we may find an answer in the life story of Joseph Wild, "First Constable of Illawarra."

Joseph Wild arrived in New South Wales on the transport Ganges in 1797, and was for a time servant to Robert Brown. He received his pardon in 1813 and some-