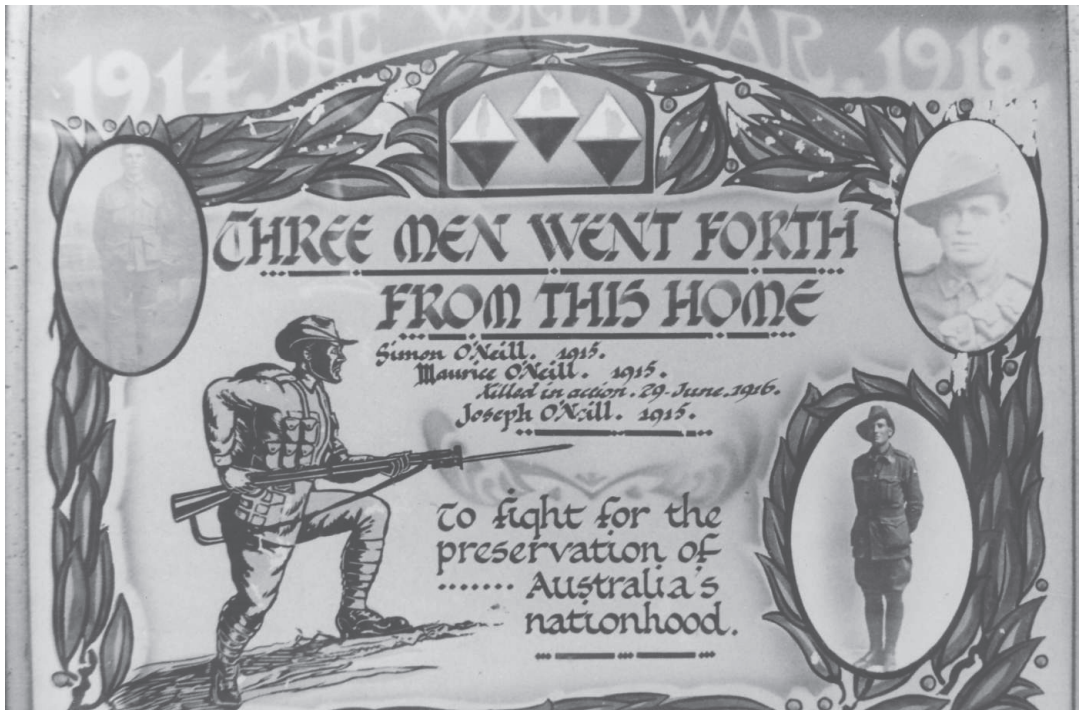


The War Diary of Maurice Edward O'Neill

(26 August 1915 – 29 June 1916)



The War Diary of Maurice Edward O'Neill



Prepared by Graham O'Neill with Melinda Haldon

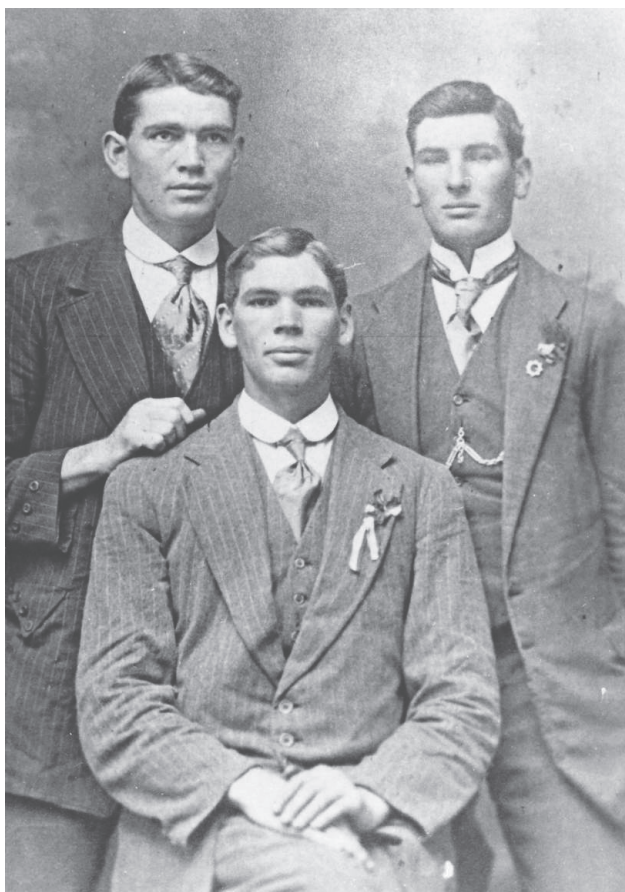
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Foreword

This is a transcript of the diary carried by Maurice O'Neill, from his first entry on August 26th 1915, made aboard the troop ship *Anchises* as he left Australia bound for the European war, through to his final entry dated June 26 1916, three days before his death during a raid on German trenches at Armentieres. In the weeks following Maurice's death, his brother Simon continued the diary, initially as he marched with his battalion from Armentieres to Pozieres's Wood, and subsequently during his evacuation from France and convalescence in Britain suffering from shell shock, having been buried in a bomb blast and what we now know as post traumatic stress syndrome following his experience of the carnage of trench warfare at Pozieres.



Simon, Maurice & Joseph O'Neill, 1915

Maurice, Simon and Joseph O'Neill were the middle three of James and Mary Jane O'Neill's ten children. The three men were close in age, with only four years separating Simon, the eldest, from younger brother Joseph, with Maurice two years either side of each of his brothers.

The O'Neills were a typical working class country family, perhaps larger than most due to their Irish Catholic heritage. The ten children grew up in South Gippsland, initially at Longford where their parents ran the local wine shop. James O'Neill died in 1906 leaving thirty-eight year old Mary Jane a widow with eight dependent children between the ages of two and sixteen. She subsequently married William Kerr and the family moved to nearby Woodside. The formal education of the brothers, as with most country boys from a working class background, was limited to primary school, possibly attending through to the sixth grade before leaving school to join the rural work force.

The original intention of the brothers was to make the twenty-mile trip from Woodside to Yarram, the closest town with an enlistment office, so they could join the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) together. All went well until the enlistment officer discovered that Joseph was two months from his twenty-first birthday and therefore required the written permission of a parent or guardian to enlist. This oversight led to Simon and Maurice being assigned to the 24th Battalion 3rd Reinforcement Unit on June 24 while they were at the Seymour Camp, some 85 kilometres north of Melbourne, whereas Joseph was not formally assigned to the Battalion and unit until August 6 when he was based at the Broadmeadows Camp on the northern outskirts of Melbourne.

At the time of their enlistment Simon was a member of the Sale Light Horse, a local detachment of a national voluntary mounted militia with troops in many towns and cities throughout Australia. In 1912, these local militia detachments were brought together to form the various Australian Light Horse regiments which fought in the first and second world wars. Simon and Maurice were also members of the Woodside Rifle club. As with the Light Horse detachments, local Rifle clubs throughout Australia had a similar militia-style role in that the rifles and ammunition were subsidised, if not supplied directly, by the federal government as a means of training volunteers for homeland defence.

The diary consists of a small lined writing pad fitted into a black leather case measuring approximately 10 by 15 centimetres. The diary was included in a package containing Maurice's personal effects as received and signed for by Mary Jane on February 5, 1917. Clearly stamped on the receipt for Maurice's effects are the words 'Consigned to me ex Wiltshire.' In 1916 The Wiltshire village of Suttony Veny and its surrounds was the location of the Number 1 Australian Army Command Depot and a major Australian Army convalescence center. The stamped notation on the receipt signed by Mary Jane suggests that Simon arranged for the diary to be included with his brother's effects and sent to their mother prior to his return to active service in January 1917. The diary was reclaimed by Simon on his return to Australia and, following his death in 1962, it was eventually passed to Graham O'Neill, the eldest of Simon's grandchildren.

In preparing this transcript, we have attempted to maintain the general layout and character of the diary and the voices of Maurice and Simon as reflected in their respective entries. For example, the diary begins with a summary by Maurice of dates and locations of his war-time travels, commencing with his initial training at Seymour camp in June 1915, his departure from Australia on August 26 and then through Egypt to Gallipoli and finally Armentieres where Simon notes Maurice's death. Simon then continues the précis of dates and locations of his own war ordeal from Armentieres through to his evacuation from France

to Britain following his involvement in the battle for Pozieres. It is difficult to know why the diary starts with this summary preceding the more detailed entries: it is as if Maurice deliberately left space at the front, perhaps for day-to-day notes. It is clear from the change in handwriting that Simon added to Maurice's time-line summary when he took over the diary after Maurice's death. Given the extraordinary intensity of the battle for Pozieres, Simon's entries for that period were clearly made during convalescence in Britain.

As would be expected, the writing throughout the diary is in pencil. Maurice's handwriting is generally neater and easier to read although Simon's entries tend to be more detailed and descriptive than those of his brother. Where necessary, the spelling of towns, cities, vessels and key figures such as Generals and politicians has been corrected to ensure consistency with historic records. We did not edit the spelling or grammar of the entries (e.g. *riffel* for rifle and *berried* for buried). Diary entries generally consist of brief phrases or a few words and there is little formal punctuation.

There are pages missing from the writing pad and impressions on the remaining blank pages indicating that the missing pages were used to make notes and then torn out. In later life, Simon gained a reputation as a 'bush poet' and the diary contains early examples of his poetry, particularly a lament for his dead brother, a poem for his mother, and an ode to his beloved fiancé Eily: other poems appear to be more in the form of works in progress and are difficult to transcribe due to unfinished themes and lines crossed out. The poetry is presented against a shaded background and positioned within the transcript similar to where they occur in the diary. At some stage, probably during early training, Maurice wrote a list of the Morse code characters for each letter of the alphabet and a list of simple German sentences. Judging from the German translations, the German phrases were dictated and thus written phonetically (e.g. (Come with me is written as *Commen zee mit mear* and not in the formal German *Sie kommen mit mir*). The Morse code characters and German phrases are not included in the transcript.

Given the brevity of the entries made by both Maurice and Simon, additional notes are included to give a background context and detail to various entries, particularly those that locate either Maurice or Simon as directly involved in significant events (e.g. Lone Pine front trenches at Gallipoli, the accident at the bomb school and Simon's action at Pozieres Wood). These notes, presented on the right of the relevant diary entry, aim to give the reader a more thorough appreciation of what Maurice and Simon were experiencing at that time. The references used for these explanatory notes are listed at the end of the transcript.

Simon's children, and those of his brothers and sisters, all knew the story of Maurice's diary, his death at Armentieres and that Simon continued the diary after his brother was killed. The story has become less well known with each subsequent O'Neill generation. The initial purpose in preparing this transcript was to share the contents of the diary with the younger generation of descendants of James and Mary Jane O'Neill, particularly those born from the nineteen sixties and onwards. However, given the historic value of the personal accounts of trench warfare at Lone Pine and Pozieres, it was always the intention that, once transcribed, the diary would be offered to a museum for safekeeping. Given the O'Neill family roots in South Gippsland date back to the 1860s, the city of Sale Armed Forces Museum was seen as the logical place to preserve this near century old record.

Graham O'Neill, September 2013

Annotated Transcript of the Diary

Maurice Edward O'Neill

Woodside

South Gippsland

Victoria

Australia

Pvt. 1960. M. E. O'Neill

A Coy. 24th Battalion

6th Brigade

2nd Division

Aust. Imp. Exp. Forces

Seymour Camp June 24 to July 17 1915

July August 26 Broadmeadows Camp

Zeitoun Camp

Egypt

Sept. 26 - Nov 4

Lone Pine Trenches

Anzac

Nov. 10 - Dec. 18

Mudros Camp

Lemnos Island

Dec. 18 = Jan. 5 1916 Tel-El-Kebir Camp

Jan 11th = Feb. 2nd

Sphinx Camp

Canal Zone

Feb 4 = March 7

Moascar Camp

Canal Zone

March 8 = March 19

Rebecq Village

France
March 30 = April 7
Fleurbaix
April 10 = April 29
L'Hallobeau
April 29 = May 28
Erquinghem
May 28 = June 11
Armentieres
Maurice was killed here
June 11 continued by Simon July 4
Bailleul
July 5 July 8
Strezele
July 8 July 9
Wardrecques
July 10 July 11
Amiens
St Saveur
July 12 July 16
Rainsville
July 16 July 18
Toutencourt
July 18 July 20
Varans July 20 July 24
July 24 Albert July 24
July 25 holding Pozieres Wood July 26
July 27 in Clearing Station Hosp July 28
July 28 in Hosp at Camiers July 30
August 1 in Hosp Calais August 2
3rd in Hospital at Sheffield England
7th Convalescent Home Doncaster

August 1915

26 left Broadmeadows camp embarked TS
Anchises Port Melbourne 3⁰⁰
Tough trip sick etc
Called at Freemantle. Troops
Westbury. Hot weather, .smooth trip.
Carnival

The three O'Neill brothers were aboard the Troop Ship *Anchises* on its first voyage carrying Australian troops to Egypt. The *Anchises* was one of five ships forming this tenth convoy of troops from Australia to the war zone.

September 1915

24 arrived Suez anchored in the bay
26 disembarked train to Zeitoun
top train. Crops etc four days camp
Sick Shoubra Hospital. 3 weeks
Company Anzac base details
zoo, pyramids, Heliopolis

Zeitoun and Heliopolis were outlying suburban districts of Cairo and Shoubra was a Military Infectious Hospital. Maurice's three-week stay in hospital means that he would have missed much of the Battalion's intense training at the Anzac base. Nonetheless, he did have time for sightseeing according to his mention of the zoo and pyramids. There is a sense of Maurice's wide-eyed country-boy wonder at this strange land in his brief description of a pyramid toward the end of the diary: *Pyramids Egypte 30 years to build, 400 feet high 3,600 men to build it and covers 3 acres.*



*Maurice and Simon, probably taken near Zeitoun Base
September-November 1915.*

From November 1914 the desert outskirts of Cairo, including Zeitoun, had become a huge tented camp tenanted by a combination of vendors, such as hairdressers, newspaper vendors, tailors, tobacconists, photographers and sellers of souvenirs. More worrying from a military discipline and health perspective was Bean's description of Cairo and its 'bright, teeming, streets, and amusements descending to any degree of filth, which beckoned to the troops in their short leisure hours'.¹

November 1915

- 4 *left Zeitoun camp 4:30 am train to Alexandria. crops, fishing, embarked Minnewaska*
- 5 *sailed 6 00 am*
- 7 *arrived Lemnos 10 am boats, escort, man down hold*
- 10 *trans shipped to Princess Ena left 4 pm landed Anzac 10 pm*
- 13 *firing line*
- 20 *sick doctor, exempt, light duties*
- 28 *Snow, cold*
- 29 *Turkish bombardment*
- In this entry, Maurice does not identify which firing line he was in after landing at Anzac Cove; however, the time-line summary at the commencement of the diary has him at the Lone Pine Trenches from November 10 to his evacuation on December 18.
- Harvey's history of the 24th Battalion describes the 28th and 29th of November as 'dark days' for the front line troops in the Lone Pine trenches. 'A cold snap set in on the 27th eventually turning into a blizzard and bringing a thick covering of snow. Many of the troops lacked nourishment and suitable clothing for the dramatic change in weather: weaker men and men in poor health collapsed'.²
- Adding further to the physical pain caused by the weather, at 9:00 in the morning of the 29th the Turks began a concentrated howitzer bombardment of the Lone Pine trenches that continued for some three hours. Pte Timothy Ahern described the bombardment in his diary: 'The front line at Lone Pine was heavily shelled by the Turks as the 24th Battalion (Vic) was moving to relieve the 23rd (Vic) Battalion. It lasted 3 hours with all kinds of shell. They buried a lot of our men alive. 364 casualties in all, we were digging them out for three days. I hope I never have the same experience again.'³

December 1915

- 4 *frozen feet, doctor, leave trenches
Exempt*
- 5 *toes frozen feet leave trenches
Exempt*

- 8 *SJ arrived went to trenches afternoon* 'SJ' refers to Maurice's brother Simon. Simon and Maurice arrived at Anzac Cove together but Simon did not initially serve in the Lone Pine trenches. Simon's movement to Lone Pine was most likely to reinforce the troop numbers following the loss of troops in the Turkish bombardment.
- 10 *SJ left Anzac*
- 18 *evacuation A2 party 3:30 am*
IHMS Russell landed
Lemnos march to camp.
- The dates given by Maurice indicate that Simon left Gallipoli eight days before the formal evacuation of troops commenced. Maurice's group, the second last to leave, departed in the early morning of December 18; the remaining troops, some 10,000 in all, left on the night of the nineteenth.

According to Bean's official account, holding the 11 miles of ANZAC front for the eight months from the first landing on April 25 to the final evacuation on December 19 claimed the lives of 7,600 Australians and nearly 2,500 New Zealanders killed or mortally wounded and 24,000 (19,000 Australians and 5,000 New Zealanders) wounded.⁴

January 1916

- 6 *left camp for embarkation*
Disappointed camp
- 6 *embarked Minnewaska*
- 8 *sailed for Alexandria*
- 10 *arrived Alexandria and came by train to*
Tel- el -Kebir camp
Arriving at 9 00 next morning
- Harvey describes the troops as being in a 'shabby condition': 'Many of them were lean and worn, numbers in bad health, and all reduced in weight and strength, a striking contrast to the imposing body of men that left Australia eight months earlier.'⁵
- The Battalion spent the Christmas of 1915 recuperating at the Mudros Camp on Lemnos Island.

February 1916

- | | | |
|----|---|--|
| 2 | <i>left Tel- el-Kebir camp train to Ismalia marched to staging camp</i> | According to Bean, it was originally intended that the Second Division, which included the 24 th Battalion, would be part of the Australian force defending the Suez Canal. However, after a month of defence preparations and desert marches, the Australian Divisions received news that they were going to France and their role was taken over by the New Zealand Mounted Rifles. |
| 3 | <i>fatigue in morning left at 11 am Marched 5 miles</i> | |
| 4 | <i>Marched to Sphinx arrived dead beat A Coy outpost</i> | |
| 20 | <i>Inspection by General Legge</i> | |

March 1916

- | | | |
|----|--|---|
| 1 | <i>field drill</i> | This early part of March spent at Moascar was devoted to preparing for the Battalion's departure to France and the Western Front. Apart from being a normal military staging camp, Moascar was also a station where soldiers were screened for illnesses and diseases, hence the references to "inoculation...fumigation and 'sa' (short arm) inspection. |
| 2 | <i>patrol march</i> | |
| 3 | <i>musketry</i> | |
| 4 | <i>left Sphinx Camp arrived staging camp about 10 pm</i> | |
| 8 | <i>exchange of rifles arrived at Moascar camp at 2130</i> | |
| 9 | <i>inoculation</i> | |
| 13 | <i>Fumigation and sa inspection 14 swimming parade</i> | |
| 18 | <i>inspection by prince of Wales , General Birdwood and staff</i> | |
| 19 | <i>left Moascar at 12 o'clock arriving at Alex at 8 00 next morning</i> | |
| 21 | <i>left Alex by the Magdalina</i> | |
| 23 | <i>Minneapolis torpedoed</i> | On the voyage from Moascar to Marseilles, the Magdalina passed the sinking Minneapolis, which had been torpedoed by a German submarine hours earlier. |
| 27 | <i>arrived Marseilles and left by train same evening</i> | |
| 28 | <i>train</i> | |
| 29 | <i>train</i> | |
| 30 | <i>arrived at our destination and left the train at 4 am marched to Rebecq</i> | |
-

April 1916

- 7 *left Rebecq and had a full days march* The front firing line trenches at Rebecq were described as occupied with rats ‘numerous enough and big enough to defend the position without the aid of men. Ravenously hungry, the rats were more annoying than the Huns, for while the men slept in the sandbag shelters the vermin raced over their faces and even stayed to nibble noses and fingers’.⁶
- 8 *another full day’s march*
- 9-10 *spell until night then went into the reserves until the 15th then went into the trenches until the 21st.*
- Came from the trenches back to Fleurbaix into billets*
- 22-23 *spell*
- 24 *back to bomb school*
- 27 *accident at bomb school* Captain HC Buckley from the 22nd Battalion was instructing a party of men in the use of hand grenades when a grenade went off in his hand. The captain and one of the men were killed and nine others wounded.⁷
- 28 *bath at Armentieres*
- 29 *left Fleurbaix billets at 9 o clock and came to L’Hallobeau* At the end of April the 24th Battalion was billeted at L’Hallobeau for four weeks and for much of this time the troops were occupied in day and night fatigue parties working to improve defences in the area. This work included digging trenches, laying communication cables, building gun screens and barbed wire entanglements. It was hard work and extremely hazardous. Carrying picks, shovels and an assortment of other tools, as well as full fighting equipment, the troops were required to march several miles to work each night and then return to their billets in the early hours of the morning. Despite the fact that the work was done under cover of darkness, the men were still subject to the ever-present danger of snipers, shrapnel, shells and stray bullets from the enemy.⁸
- 30 *spell church parade*

May 1916

- 1 *drill* In response to a series of intense bombardments of German shells and trench mortar bombs, the 20th Battalion was loaned two recently developed British mortars, (Stokes mortars), to help defend its positions. After a particularly heavy shelling, described as ‘a concentration of fire such as Australian troops had never

- 2 *Guard*
- 3 *wet. stand too all night stokes guns taken*
- 4 *Round march night fatigue*
- 5 *Inspection. Night fatigue*
- 6 *aeroplane brought down by Germans*
- 7 *church parade*
- 8 *Company for duty*
- 9 *Parade expecting stunt at night*
- 10 *baths in morning*
- 11 *drill fatigue all night*
- 12 *sleep in rest*
- 13 *rain*
- 14 *Church parade fatigue*
- 15 *Inspection*
- 16 *Rifel exercise. G.H drill*
- 17 *Digging trenches, night fatigue*
- 18 *digging trenches*
- 19 *digging trenches gas and tear shell school. 20 night fatigue*
- 21 *spell*
- 22 *trench digging night fatigue*
- 23 *baths*
- 24 *inspection night fatigue*
- 25 *Payday*
- 26 *lecture on bombs and gas helmet practice*
- 27 *drill. Night fatigue*
- 28 *church at Croix du Bac and left billets a night and shifted to __near Bois Grenier*
- 29 *spell night fatigue*
- 30 *spell night fatigue*
- 31 *spell night fatigue shifted camp to Erquinghem. Shells*

known – and probably as severe while it lasted as any they afterward suffered⁹, - the Germans raided the Australian defences taking prisoners and weapons. Much consternation and recrimination resulted when British High Command subsequently learned - initially from German wireless announcements - that the two Stokes mortars, Britain's secret trench warfare weapon, had been captured by the enemy. The astonishing thing was that the Germans gave no attention to the guns and they were never recognised as Stokes mortars.¹⁰

June 1916

- | | | |
|----|--|--|
| 1 | <i>6th Bgde inspected by Mr Hughes
Mr Fisher Generals Birdwood + Legge.

Observation balloon broke loose, two
men coming down in parachute went
out of sight but no work.</i> | Australian Prime Minister William Morris
(Billy) Hughes was given the nickname ‘The
Little Digger’ partly for his stature, but mainly
for the rousing and enthusiastically received
speeches he gave to the Australian troops on
his visits to the front line in Europe in 1916.
General Birdwood was a British army officer
commanding the AANZ Army |
| 2 | <i>reported to HQ for bomb school and
were not wanted.</i> | |
| 3 | <i>bomb school</i> | |
| 4 | <i>church at Erquinghem news of navel battle</i> | |
| 5 | <i>better news of navel encounter night fatigue</i> | |
| 6 | <i>news of munition factory Lille blown up
no fatigue</i> | |
| 7 | <i>bomb school Pay day</i> | |
| 8 | <i>night fatigue</i> | |
| 9 | <i>night fatigue</i> | |
| 10 | <i>night fatigue</i> | |
| 11 | <i>church in morning left billets at about
9 o'clock and shifted camp to _____
Armentieres.</i> | |
| 12 | <i>Reveille at 2:30 fatigue in trenches</i> | |
| 13 | <i>Guard</i> | |
| 14 | <i>guard</i> | |
| 15 | <i>fatigue</i> | |
| 16 | <i>fatigue. Pass to [indecipherable
Sonnen?]</i> | |
| 17 | <i>fatigue</i> | |

- 20 *Raid practice pay day Armentieres at night.*
- 21 *Raid practice.*
- 22 *R P*
- 23 *R p. Baths. Coy trenches*
- 24 *R P*
- 25 *Sunday*
- 26 *Training for raid in raiding school*
[this is Maurice's last entry]
- 27
- 28 *rested all day*
[This is Simon's first entry]
6.30 fill in for raid went front line
trenches blackened our faces waited
till 11-00 jumped parrypits crawled
over no mans land at time given
charged in this chase Maurice was
killed – was buried at 1-30 on 30 July

Sudden, short raids on German positions became a successful tactic in the Armentieres sector. These raids had combined objectives: to shock the enemy with the swiftness of the raid and the casualties involved, to take prisoners for questioning and gather documentation and other information for intelligence purposes. The raid planned for the night of June 29 was the second such assault by Australians on German positions and included troops from the 21st, 22nd, 23rd and 24th Battalions. According to Murray,¹¹ representatives from the 24th Battalion included some of the finest of the Battalion's Anzac troops and he singles out Maurice and Simon O'Neill in the dozen or so troops listed by name.

When the raiding party had been selected and assembled, the men were provided with special billets and rations, during the period in which they undertook special training for the raid.

The official AIF record notes that this was a comparatively large assault force with 8 officers and 240 men from the 22nd, 23rd and 24th Battalions and a covering party comprising 3 officers and 61 men from the 21st Battalion. The record also details that the raid 'involved an expenditure of about 8,000 shells, mainly of field artillery, and 1,000 trench-mortar bombs'.¹²

The official AIF report record notes 'the dead and wounded of all parties were carried back – a very gallant feat'.¹³ Overall, the raid was deemed a success with 50 Germans killed and five prisoners taken. Maurice was one of five Australians killed. His army file notes that he was buried at Ration Farm Cemetery 1½ miles south of Armentieres on July 30 1916.



*Joseph O'Neill, standing over brother Maurice's grave, Armentieres,
Western Front, winter 1916-17*

July 1916

*Left trenches 3 July marched to
Oostersteene stoped 3 days fatigue one
day 4 day left on march all day*

5 Town [circled] all day marching

*7 marched 7 miles marched through town
[circled] entrained [at [indecipherable]
[probably Wardrecques]*

[2 pages missing from journal]

16 *Sunday left St. Sauveur near St Valery sur
somme*

*Marched 6 miles camped at Rainneville
Sunday evening 400 francs stolen Parade
fell in.)*

17 *remained in Rainneville for spell*

18 *on march left Rainneville – at 11-AM*

20 21 *in rest camp 12 miles from Albert. Saw
German prisoners, raid at 2 up school.
German Brigedeer general.*

21 *Friday 21 R march but morning
shortages afternoon R M [route march]
Varenes landed here on 20th*

23 *Sunday*

*1 Division captured poziers wood
captured several hundred prisoners still
strong fighting*

24 *drill in morning 7 →PM afternoon*

*5 news in papers of Armentieres raid
inspection in morning*

*7 → saw prisoners that Australians
cptd [captured] good fighters but rough
(21 days for lighting a fire prison)*

*Prisoners handed A (1) Treatmint after
Raid at Armentieres*

Engines in dugout bombed.

Sgt Armstrong 3 officers killed

25 *marched to Albert in morning*

*germans tied to tree GI gun no close on
[no clothes on]-] Division cut up badly
done worst in trenches*

At Rainneville a woman claimed to have been robbed of 400 francs. The entire Battalion was halted and lined up for the woman to identify the thief. No identification was made and the troops were dismissed. The money was subsequently reimbursed to the woman despite widespread doubts about her claim.¹⁴

The issue of a penalty for lighting the fire refers to an event on the night of July 18. The 24th Battalion was marching from Armentieres to Pozieres as part of a British offensive known as ‘the big push of 1916’, the objective being to push the Germans from their well-fortified positions around the village of Pozieres. Murray describes the incident of the fire as follows: ‘the night is intensely cold. Our men, having no blankets, cannot sleep. They are forbidden to light fires, for the lights would be observed by enemy aeroplanes. It is a trying time. One company lights a fire and the fire guard turns out. The offenders are promised that they will be punished. The boys sing and whistle till they exhaust their repertoire of tunes. Then everybody gets miserable. There is no mention of a prison term on Simon’s personal record. We can confidently assume the promised punishment was discarded.

26 July – [pages missing]

going in trenches tonight now resting at Albert. Expect to jump the parrypit enytime from 8 hours from now and I know we are going to have a very stiff battle.

Simon

good work

29 *in hospital near Etaples after hard battle berried and shock Lieut Kerr & Nagers killed alongside me Donald myself beckham Egan berried combination of B Coy 22 Batt*

Tommy with rifle in hand dead

Fired on our own men

Tommy found by our own boys after 6 days lost leg off. one Blind

Mine crater 50 yards across German dugouts 50 feet deep

5 Prisoners beds wiemen

Artillery officers helped us out of trenches Lost taken for Germans German wounded in dugout Bombed

26 of July heavy B B [bombardment] at Pozieres wood berried

Percy Nolan done first

Close work in trenches

Pozers-wood and Village. I was in the holding of hospital

Simon's entry for July 29 was written just hours after being evacuated from Pozieres and admitted to hospital in the French port town of Etaples where he was awaiting evacuation to Britain. The diary entry captures a series of graphic word pictures describing scenes from some thirty- six hours of continuous fighting while constantly subject to intense German shelling.

The action described here by Simon, where Lieutenant Kerr was killed, took place early in the morning of July 28 and is described by Murray as a bombardment on Australian positions which kept up a 'withering fire for 36 hours in which' the troops suffered heavily' with whole sections being killed, buried or wounded.' Members of the 22nd Battalion's B Company and 24th Battalion's A Company were caught in a trench so crammed with troops that they could barely move. Lieut Kerr was killed with the first shell to fall on this line. At one stage it was estimated that field casualties were occurring at the rate of 60 per Battalion per hour.¹⁵

The aftermath of this battle is described by Bean: 'Only those who saw the troops come out from such experiences could realise their exhaustion. They looked like men who had been in Hell, drawn and haggard and so dazed that they appeared to be walking in a dream and their eyes looked glassy and starey.'¹⁶

August 1916

- 1 *railway smash*
*Training through France on road to
England*
- 2 *Landed Dover England 2:00 afternoon*
Feelmeneon [?] captd by French
- 3 *in General Hospital at Sheffield*
*[probably 3rd Northern General Hospital
Sheffield]*
- 4 *had an open air garden concert at Hosp*
3rd general
- 5 *Motor house gardening and party concert*
at M.P. of Sheffield (M Robinson)
- 6 *went to church and got lost*
- 7 *went to Doncaster convels Home.*
- 8 *in grounds all day*
- 9 *down town morning & afternoon*
- 10 *motor trip to Lord Halleyfax estate*
- 11 *for walk in wood & park*
- 12 *down town morning Photos afternoon*
- 13 *[2 pages missing]*

I

*Life is life yet many does not know
What that word means or even what it is
Life would be sweeter if they only could
To many, until death, that word remains not understood*

*Wake up lads your country needs you
Cant you hear your comraids call
Hear the crying of the wounded
As they stagger reel and fall
Help.s [indecipherable]
Do not let them shout in vain
Gallant soldiers when wounded
Heal their wounds then fight again
But the lines that they have taken
Cannot be held against the foe
Who shall hold it for those heroes
While their wounds are healing slow*

*They did more you must remember
They gave up their lives for you
Heroes that are gon for ever
Died like all young heroes do
Fighting for their king and country
They have also died for you
Must we loose the trench they've taken from a cowardly foe
Cause our ranks are badly shaken
No my lads I answer no
They have took it we shall hold it
Till we dead or wounded fall
But your help is badly needed
Who will arrive to my call
Take a rifle fix your bayonet
Do not let leave the (?) hour late
Leave your home and leave your mother
Come before it is to late*

To mother

*Weep not let not a tear drop fall
Even [though] you loose your gallant soldier boy
Great is the burden mothers must bear
Just pray for him to reach eternal joy*

Written on 21 July

*In remembrance of my Dear Brother and true comrade who fell
in a short battle at Armentieres on 29 June 1916*

Those lips I once caressed are sealed in death

Those eyes I loved so well no longer shine

That kind yet noble heart is calm and still

The loss of this true heart has steadied mine

Those snowy locks I loved from me are gone

I miss his smile the smile I love so well

I miss his hand. the hand I clasped in mine

The hand I clasped a while before he fell

I miss that voice that oft gave me advice

I miss his face twas ever gay and bright

I miss him all, a gallant soldier lad

Henceforth I'm marching through a world of [thought or night]

Simon RIP

To Mother

If our hearts be calm and still

In death our lips be sealed

If your flesh and blood be scattered on the battle field

Do not wait or do not worry

Ease your heart of pain with your trust in god and prayer

We shall meet again

From Simon

Written on July 24 1916

As I wandered on the plains today

In fancy I could see

A plesent sweet & smiling face that's always dear to me

And while I live no other face my eyes their love will share

And my harts as true as the sky is blue to the one I name below ...Eily.

Remembering a dead soldier's son

The poor troubled [?] mothers whose sons are now gone

They payed the full price on the field

The poor RS [regimental soldier] whos pal is now dead

A pal who was starch brave and true.

Who when he was dying just looked up and & said Good bye and

God Bless you I'm through.

There was an old soldier named Winning

And he was continually grinning

Till a shrapnel shell burst

Then old Jimmy cursed (cursed)

A wonderful soldier was Winning.

Jim Collins G Coy 25th Battalion 7 Bgd France

A for Australians the –can fight
 B the Boche they're put into flight
 C is cruel) its bred in the Hun
 D is damage the damage they done
 E is for Ever We'll keep them at Bay
 F is Fritz whose beginning to sway
 H is for Huns whom we keep on the trot
 I is Ireland where they tried to land
 J is also Jutland
 K is for Kaiser a murdering Hun
 L Lusitania just think what they done ¹⁷

Sep 2. 1916

Dear Sir

I am writing to ask you if you will kindly let me know if there is any word to hand about my dear sons money and effects. I have not heard anything yet or know his Will is left, I would deem it a great favour if you could find out all particulars and let me know,

could you also let me know where or how my other son Pte S J O'Neill who was wounded recently I would like to know if he was sent to England or if he would be allowed to come home for a while till he recovers from his wounds I am inquiring about my son Pte M E O'Neill who was killed in action in France on 30 June

Hoping I am not putting you to inconvenience

I remain yours Sincerely

Mrs W Kerr

The above letter
 from file 4. small
 recently would
 you wish to know
 about a case long
 a receipt for a sum
 and my son's
 letter in clear in
 the
 the
 remain yours sincerely
 Mrs W Kerr
 11, outside
 south

Page 1 of 2

Letter from Mary Jane Kerr requesting information on Maurice's personal effects and Simon's whereabouts

Postscript

On arrival in England, Simon was admitted to the Third Northern General Hospital in Sheffield for an assessment of his injuries and was probably in residential care at the nearby Doncaster Convalescent Home for the first month or so of his recuperation. The initial diagnosis, recorded on August 31, resulted in him being assessed as 'Class A', meaning that following treatment, he could be expected to be medically fit and able to resume front line duties. However, a follow-up assessment in mid-September adjusted his rating to 'Class B', thus restricting his future service to activities behind the front line. Accordingly, when he resumed service in January 1917, he was posted to the Sixth Training Battalion, part of the Australian Army Service Corps, with the rank of Driver. A year later, In January 1918, he was transferred to the newly formed Fifth Auxiliary Motor Transport Company, a unit formed in France to make more efficient use of mechanised transport in supply columns. In this role, Simon served his last year of the war on the Western Front, behind the lines and out of the trenches. Simon left Britain on March 3 1919 and arrived in Australia on April 22. He was formally discharged from the army on August 17.

We know from his personnel record that Joe O'Neill served with his brothers at Gallipoli. However, there is no information regarding his service from when he left Gallipoli on, November 11 1915, until he is reported as being at Kortepyp Camp in the Ploegsteert sector of the Western front in December 1917. Joe was gassed on March 21 at Prowse point in Belgium during a heavy bombardment of gas shells. It was estimated that some 5000 shells drenched an area of ten acres with mustard gas during this attack. Joe was initially treated at the Second Australian General Hospital in Boulogne and then transferred to Britain where he spent eight months in a sequence of convalescent hospitals recuperating from the effects of the gas. Joe eventually re-joined his battalion in France in November 1918 and was subsequently repatriated to Australia on April 8, 1919.

Maurice was buried at the Ration Farm Military Cemetery in France. The entry in the official cemetery register reads as follows:-

"O'Neill, Pte. Maurice Edward, 1960. 24th Bn. Australian Inf. Killed in action June 30th, 1916. Age 23. Son of James and Mary Jane O'Neill, of Woodside, Victoria, Australia. Native of Derriman, Victoria. Plot 1, Row 1, Grave 3." Maurice's name is located at Panel 102 on the Honour Roll in the Commemorative Area at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

The three men were each awarded the 1914 – 15 Star for service at Gallipoli, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.

WELCOME HOME SOCIAL TO DARRIMAN AND GIFFARD'DIGGERS'

One of the largest gatherings of people seen for years in the Darriman Hall assembled on Monday evening, 14th ult., to welcome home the local returned soldiers. The following were the guests of the evening: Ptes. S. O'Neill, J. O'Neill, H. J. Gooding, C. Patterson, and A. Patterson. F Foord was unable to be present owing to illness. Unfortunately, two local boys, (Ptes. G. Patterson and M. O'Neill), have made the supreme sacrifice. The residents desire to extend their sincerest sympathy to their parents and families for their great loss. Both these families have nobly done their duty in the Great War. The fourth son of Mr. and Mrs. Patterson has not yet returned from active service. Proceedings opened with the singing of the National Anthem. The company then sat down to an excellent tea, provided by the ladies, ample justice being done to the good things provided. The tables were tastefully decorated, for which special thanks are due to Mrs. W Kerr and Mrs. C. Gooding. The hall was also gaily decorated for the occasion with bunting and evergreens. The Chairman (Mr. H. Gooding) said they had gathered that evening to do honour to the returned boys present and to extend to them a hearty welcome home. He hoped that long life and prosperity would be theirs. Cr. Nightingale (Alberton Shire) also extended a hearty welcome home to the diggers, and said too much could not be done for the boys who gave up everything to fight for right and liberty. The name the Australians had made for themselves was second to none. He trusted that success would attend them in whatever sphere of life they took up. Cr. Nightingale then presented each soldier with a gold medal, suitably inscribed, from the district residents. Messrs. W. Curtis, Cavanagh, and Howard also addressed words of welcome to the guests of the evening. Ptes. S. O'Neill, H. J. Gooding, C. Patterson, J. O'Neill, and A. Patterson suitably responded, and stated that Australia was a country worth fighting for. They thanked the residents for the presentations, and for the splendid welcome they had received that evening. The company then rose and sang "For They are Jolly Good Fellows." A start was then made to clear the hall for a dance. About forty couples danced to the music supplied by Mr Cochrane, Miss G. Lamb, and H. J. Gooding, the last named also proving an efficient M.C. During the evening songs were contributed by Mrs Cochrane, A. Howard, C. Westwood and recitations by Pte. S. O'Neill (encored) and J. O'Neill. The chairman passed a hearty vote of thanks to Mr. Cochrane to whom the committee was greatly indebted for the valuable assistance he rendered; also to the ladies, who provided the refreshments and to those who came from surrounding districts and helped to make the welcome home such a huge success.

The Gippsland Times, 21 July 1919

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Endnotes

¹ Bean (a) p.66

² Harvey, p. 59

³ Accessed at www.anzacsite.gov.au

⁴ Bean (a) p.181

⁵ Harvey p. 59

⁶ Harvey p.72

⁷ Harvey p.72

⁸ Harvey pp. 75-76

⁹ Bean (a) p. 208

¹⁰ Bean (a) p. 209

¹¹ Murray, p. 80

¹² Bean 1941, pp. 270-1

¹³ Bean, 1941, p. 270

¹⁴ Harvey p. 88

¹⁵ Murray pp 94-95

¹⁶ Bean(a), p. 249

¹⁷ Reference to the British passenger ship Lusitania en route from New York to Liverpool which was torpedoed by a German submarine near the coast of Ireland. One thousand, one hundred and ninety eight passengers were lost including 159 Americans. The sinking of the Lusitania hastened the entry of the USA into the war.]