



20th Battalion Colour Patch

Driver Harold Alfred SPARKS 2452 – 20th Battalion, 5th Reinforcements

Born: 25 May 1894, Trangie, NSW.

Parents: Thomas and Emily Sparks

Occupation: Labourer

District Connection: Yeoval, Bournewood.

Enlistment Date: 27 Jul 1915, Liverpool, NSW.

Enlistment Age: 21yrs 3 months.

Embarkation: 6 Sep 1915, Sydney, *HMAT Ballarat A75*

Served: Egypt, France, Belgium.

Fate: RTA 4 Jul 1919, *HT Nestor*.

Honour Boards: Yeoval, Wellington & Cumnock

Biography

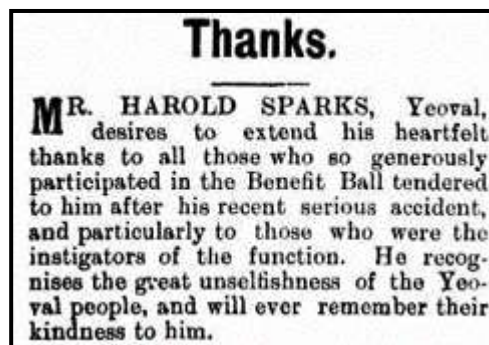
Harold's parents were Thomas and Emily Sparks and he was the third child of four children: Louisa Florence 1890-1978; Priscilla E 1892-1892; Harold Alfred 1894-1970; and Mabel J 1896-1896.

Thomas Sparks was born near Bathurst in 1857, the son of Urban and Jane Sparks. Urban, Jane and their infant daughter, Mahala, had left England on the *Midolthian* as assisted immigrants, and arrived in Sydney on the 8 Apr 1849. Thomas was one of 13 children. He married Emily Gale at Dubbo in 1888. Thomas was a carrier and the family lived in Trangie for a time. Emily Sparks died in Trangie in December 1910, when Harold was 16 years old and his sister Louisa was 20yrs old. Thomas moved to Yeoval by 1913, where the family lived at "Trigview" on the Bournewood Road. Thomas's brother, Urban Sparks owned the 450-acre property, "Trigview", until Jan 1914, when he sold it to Percy Blatch.

The Molong Argus – 25 Apr 1913, p4, Cumnock:

"A very painful accident occurred at Yeoval on Sunday, when H Sparkes, 19 years of age, son of Mr T Sparkes of Triggview, was thrown from his horse sustaining a badly broken leg. He was out riding with two companions, when his horse stumbled over a log, and falling on him, broke his left leg below the knee. He was conveyed with all haste to Cumnock, where Dr Aird set the injured limb, which is progressing favourably. He is staying with Mrs J Barter, at Cumnock, where Dr Aird is unremitting in his attentions to him."

The injury took some months to heal and a well-attended benefit social was held in the Yeoval Hall on Harold's behalf in May and which Harold placed an advertisement of Thanks in the *Molong Express & Western District Advertiser*- 21 Jun 1913, p11.



Harold recovered from his injury and 1914 & 1915 news reports mention him playing football for Yeoval in the halfback or three quarters positions, plus tennis and cricket.

Harold had his medical examination for the AIF on 22 Jul 1915 and travelled to Liverpool to enlist on 27 Jul 1915, along with other friends from Yeoval and Obley. He was 21yrs and 3 months old, occupation that of a labourer, 5 feet 5 inches tall, had a fair complexion, blue eyes, fair hair and was of the Church of England religious denomination. He listed his father, Thomas Sparkes, as his next of kin.

The Molong Express & Western District Advertiser – 24 Jul 1915, p3:

"Five young men passed the Doctor here this week, prior to enlisting. Four of them leave here this week for Victoria Barracks— Harold Sparkes, Harold Edwards, Ernie Merriman, and Bert Cody. Mr Triggs will leave during the first week of August..."

Pte Harold Sparks, Pte Harold Edwards and Pte Ernest Merriman were incorporated into the 20th Battalion, 1-13 Reinforcements. Harold and Ernie returned to Yeoval on final leave before embarking on *HMAT Ballarat A75*, at Sydney, on 6 Sep 1915, bound for Egypt.

The reinforcements for the 20th Battalion were not sent to Gallipoli to join their regiment, but stayed in Egypt training. Harold and Ernie, along with many other soldiers of the 5th reinforcements, came down with the mumps and were admitted to the 4th Auxiliary Hospital at Abbassia around the end of November 1915. They are likely to have received word while in hospital that 2653 Pte Harold Edwards who embarked on 2 Nov 1915 on *HMAT Euripedes A14*, died of pneumonia on route to Egypt, on 22 Nov 1915, and was buried at sea. He was only 21 years old.

The Molong Express & Western District Advertiser – 5 Feb 1916, p14, **Soldiers's Stories, Seeing Plenty of Life:** "A Yeoval-Bournewood soldier, Pte. Harold Sparkes, writing to his father, Mr Thos. Sparkes, from Heliopolis on Dec 11, says: I am in the hospital, suffering from the mumps, but they are all right again now, and I think I will be going out the day after Christmas. We get well looked after in the hospital. I will be sorry when I have to leave it. It is lovely weather over here now— nice and cool. I have struck a few old mates over here— Bob Butters, from Trangie, and Frank George. I have not struck A. Smart yet.

The only thing I don't like over here is the sand. It is very dead to walk on— just like following the harrows; but I am getting quite used to it now.

Ernie is in the same hospital as me, also with the mumps. He is alright again now. He wishes to be remembered to you, and to tell you that he is enjoying himself and seeing life. So am I, but I want to see a bit more yet, now I have started. I don't know how long we will be here; not long, I hope. I won't be satisfied till I get a Turk or two.

Remember me to all the old Bournewood folks, and tell them I am well. I am getting as fat as a fool since I came over here— I weigh 11st 2lbs now. That's not bad, considering I was only 10st when I enlisted. I hear that some more of the Yeoval boys are going to enlist. Let them all come; the more the merrier. They will see plenty of life."

Trooper Raymond Chappell, from Eurimbla, had a letter published in the *Molong Express & Western District Advertiser* - 18 Mar 1916, p16, written from Wordan, Egypt in Jan 1916, and he states he: "Met L Stark, J Murray, H Sparkes and E Merriman at Heliopolis [Cairo] where they stopped."

The 20th Btn had arrived back from Gallipoli on 9 January and were stationed at Tel el Kebir when Pte Sparks returned to duty with the battalion on 19 January. On 24 January the regiment moved to Moascar by train and made camp at Australia Hill on 27 January. Here they underwent training, trench digging and railway building. The 20th Btn returned to Moascar on 8 Mar 1916, and moved to Alexandria on the 18 March. Pte Sparks and Pte Merriman were two of the 22 officers and 876 ordinary ranks of the 20th Btn who embarked on the "*Ingoma*" at Alexandria on 19 March. The ship sailed past Malta and Sardinia and disembarked its troops at Marseilles, on 25 Mar 1916.

War Diary of 20th Btn: From Marseilles the 20th Btn spent the next two days travelling by train to Thiennes, Northern France. The 20th Btn was reviewed by Lord Kitchener at Steenbecque on 1 Apr 1916, and by 11 April were experiencing front line trench duty at Bois Grenier, near Armentières.

On 5 May 1916 the Germans carried out an intense bombardment of the Bridoux Salient and support lines in the rear, which lasted two hours. This was followed by a German raiding party at the apex of the Salient— which gave the 20th Btn the dubious honour of being the first Australian battalion to be raided by the Germans— and resulted in the capture of Lieut. NR Blanchard and 10 ordinary ranks. Another Lieutenant died of wounds and a Captain was wounded, as well as 23 ordinary ranks (ORs) killed, and 75 ordinary ranks wounded.

One of the ORs killed was Harold's friend, 2410 Pte Ernest Merriman, aged 28 years. He was the first Cumnock soldier to be killed in action in France during WW1.



The Molong Express & Western District Advertiser – 3 Jun 1916, p8, **Cumnock Comments – A Soldier's Death:** "On Tuesday a gloom was cast over the Cumnock district by the receipt of a wire intimating that Private Ernest Merriman, son of Mrs F Merriman, had been killed in action in France on 5th of May. His death is very much regretted by the whole community. He was a keen 'sport', and was also well-liked by everyone in this and the Yeoval and Obley districts. He enlisted in November, and had not been in the firing line prior to going to France. In a letter received by his brother a week ago, he wrote that France was a fine country, well worth fight for, and that Pte H Sparkes was with him. Both were then well..."

The 20th Btn was part of the 5th Brigade which consisted of four infantry battalions— the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th battalions— and was assigned to the 2nd Division. The 2nd Division consisted of the 5th, 6th and 7th Brigades, the 2nd Division Artillery and a Field Ambulance. The 2nd Division in turn was part of 1 ANZAC Corps— 1st & 2nd Australian Divisions and the New Zealand Division.

The AIF carried out a series of trench raids in June 1916 in preparation for the major Somme Offensive. Pte Sparks volunteered for one of the first raids— on the night of 25-26 Jun 1916. Eight officers and 73 other ranks from the 5th Brigade took part in the raid, at Bois Grenier, near Armentières. The successful raid killed 30 of the enemy, captured four Germans and blew up two bomb stores for the loss of only one Australian. Private John William Jackson, 588 - 17th Btn, won the first Australian Victoria Cross on the Western Front in this raid, in which he was also severely wounded.

*The Molong Express & Western District Advertiser – 2 Sep 1916, p3, **Soldiers' Stories:**
"Pte Harold Sparkes, son of Mr Thomas Sparkes, of Yeoval, writing from France on June 30 to his sister, Miss L. Sparkes, of Wellington, says: — This leaves me OK at present; only the weather is not too nice— raining every day. We had quite an exciting time here through the week, when a party of us set out to make a raid on the Huns trenches. I was lucky enough to be in it. Of course, when the Huns knew we were coming, they let fly with their artillery and machine guns; but they did not stop us from getting into their trenches and getting what was wanted.
We captured a few Huns and several other little things, and then got back to our own trenches after the shells had stopped flying about. We had quite a lively time while it lasted, and it was also a bit risky. The next morning the Major who was in charge of the show gave us great credit for what we had done, and said that he could not help mentioning my name for the way I carried out my duties that night. A few of our lads got wounded; and only for that the whole show was a great success."*

On 11 Feb 1917, Harold Sparks was mustered as a Driver. A driver in WW1 rode on team horses which pulled wagons, guns, ambulances, equipment. Usually a wagon had a team of 6 horses, 3 pairs of 2. Each driver was responsible for his two horses (feeding, shoeing, vet care, etc.) and he teamed up with two other drivers to pull the wagon. Drivers were essential in getting supplies, food, ammunition and equipment to the men at the front, and bringing wounded back to medical stations. It was a dangerous job as they were targeted by machine guns and artillery to prevent them getting supplies through.



"In July and August the 20th Btn took part in the Battle of Pozières, during which time it served in the line twice before moving to a quieter sector in Belgium for a period of rest. In October, however, the entire 2nd Division was moved to the south again and put back into the line in France once again and in November they launched an attack at Flers, in conditions that were so muddy that they were described by the official historian, Charles Bean, as "the worst ever encountered by the AIF".

Throughout 1917 the 20th Btn was involved in three major battles as the German Army was forced back towards the Hindenburg Line, seeing action at Bullecourt in May, Menin Road in September and Poelcappelle in October. At Lagnicourt, on 15 April, along with other units from the 5th Brigade, they took part in a defensive action along with four other battalions, where they managed to defeat a counter-attack by a German force almost five times its size. In 1918, the battalion was involved in repelling the German Spring Offensive, when the 20th was one of many Australian battalions that were hurried in to the line to stop it, and on 7 April 1918, they took part in a very sharp engagement at Hangard Wood. Once the German offensive was defeated, the Allies launched their own, known as the Hundred Days Offensive which eventually brought about an end to the war. During this time the 20th Btn were involved in the battles at Amiens and Mont St Quentin in August, before participating in the attack on the "Beaurevoir Line" at Montbrehain in October. This would be the battalion's last contribution to the war, as it was training out of the line when the Armistice was declared in November 1918. It was disbanded on 20 April 1919 while at Montigny-le-Tilluel, Belgium, when most of its personnel, including the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Forbes, were marched out for repatriation to Australia as part of the demobilisation process. During the war, the 20th Battalion lost 848 men killed and 3,143 men wounded."

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/20th_Battalion_\(Australia\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/20th_Battalion_(Australia))

Driver Sparks reported sick for one day on 24 Nov 1918, which was the only recorded sick day in his records for the entire time he spent at the Western Front. He had leave from France on 29 Jan 1919 in England and then returned to his battalion. He left England to return to Australia on *HT Nestor* on 20 May 1919, arriving in Sydney on 4 Jul 1919. Driver Sparks was discharged from the AIF on 27 Aug 1919 and received the 1914/15 Star, British War and Victory Medals.

The Sydney Morning Herald – 11 Jul 1919, p10, Country News, reported that “Six returned men were welcomed home at a social at Yeoval, and were presented with gold medals and wallets of notes.” It is likely that Driver Sparks was one of the returned men.

The Wellington Times – 24 Jul 1919, p5, Bournemouth, reported that a Peace Day celebration was held at Bournemouth on 19 July and that, “During the afternoon opportunity was taken to welcome home Driver Harold Sparkes, who has been on active service for the past four years. Mr CF Quigley, on behalf of the Bournemouth people, presented the soldier with a gold chain and medal, suitably inscribed.”

Harold returned to labouring work in the Yeoval district after the war and recommenced playing football. *The Molong Express & Western District Advertiser* – 13 Jul 1919, Yeoval, announced the engagement of Harold to May [Mary Jane] Miskell, of Bathurst, formerly of Yeoval, and eldest daughter of Mr & Mrs John Miskell, and the *Wellington Times* – 3 Oct 1929, p9, Yeoval, announced their marriage at Bathurst on Saturday 28 Sep 1929. They made their home at Bathurst, where Harold continued to work as a labourer. (Australia Electoral Rolls, 1930-1949, Macquarie/Bathurst).

The National Advocate, Bathurst – 10 Feb 1934, p6, **An Involved Case**, mentions that Harold Alfred Thomas Sparks was an employee of Gordon Edgell & Sons Ltd, orchardists and agriculturists.

Harold's father, Thomas Sparks, died on 20 Nov 1939 at Dubbo, aged 83 years. He had lived at Dubbo with his daughter, Mrs Lousia Colahan, for the previous 17 years.

Mary's mother, Violet Miskell (59yrs) and her brother, Victor (28yrs), died as a result of a car accident near Canowindra on 4 Aug 1940. *The Molong Express & Western District Advertiser* – 10 Aug 1940, p8, reported on the accident. The car contained seven members of the Miskell family, travelling to Canowindra for a football match between Yeoval and Canowindra. Violet Miskell was the mother of 16 children, nine of whom were boys.

Harold Sparks served in WW2, as serviceman N196569, in the Army Citizen Military Forces, at Bathurst.

The National Advocate, Bathurst – 6 Jul 1951, p4, **Departure of Popular Residents**, reported: “Bathurstians generally, and sports followers in particular, will regret to learn of the departure this week of two of the city's best known residents, Mr & Mrs Harold Sparks, who left during the week to make their new home in Parkes.

Mr and Mrs Sparks had been residents of Bathurst for 25 years. The former, after serving in the last war, came to Bathurst in the 1920's, and immediately took a keen interest in local football, He made one appearance with the old Globe Hotel team— local champions in their day. In later years, he played a more active part, as secretary [and Treasurer] of Waratah Football Club, acting in that capacity when this team dominated the local sphere ten years ago. Mr Sparks has been Club delegate for several years. Major Sullivan, commanding officer of the Ordinance Depot, where Mr Sparks was formerly employed, on behalf of the personnel, presented him with six crystal goblets as a token of the esteem in which he was held. Mr and Mrs Sparks will occupy positions on the staff of the Exchange Hotel, Parkes...”

It is not known how long Harold and Mary Sparks stayed in Parkes, but by 1954 they had moved to Sydney where the couple are listed in the 1954, 1958 & 1963 Australia Electoral Rolls, Phillip/Coogee, as living at 36 Marcel Avenue, Randwick, with Harold's occupation that of a storeman.

Harold Sparks died aged 75 years, on 8 Mar 1970, at Concord Repatriation Hospital, Sydney, and was buried at the Macquarie Park Cemetery. Mary Sparks died aged 81 years, on 12 Mar 1985 at Sydney.

2452 Private Harold Alfred Thomas SPARKES, 20th Battalion, features on p666 of the book, *Wellington's Finest*, by Trevor Munro & Graeme Hosken, 2005.



Above & painting on p3, by Harold Septimus Power, showing the conditions that Drivers faced. H Septimus Power was appointed an official war artist for Australia in September 1917.
P3 – Going into action, 1917. (Watercolour)
 Above – *The Battle before Villers Bretonneux, August 8th 1918.*



Above left – WW1 Honour Plaque, Cumnock War Memorial Gates, Obley Street, Cumnock.

Above right – WW1 Honour Plaque, Yeoval Memorial Hall, Forbes Street, Yeoval.

Left: Wellington Council WW1 Honour Roll, Corner of Nanima Crescent and Warne Street, Wellington.