



Lance Corporal Leslie COOPER + 725 – 36th Btn, “C” Company

Born: 1897, Obley (Registered Molong)

Parents: George & Elizabeth Cooper, Obley

Occupation: Labourer

District Connection: Obley, Yeoval, Cumnock.

Enlistment Date: 20 Jan 1916

Enlistment Age: 18yrs 11 mths

Embarkation: 13 May 1916, Sydney, *HMAT A70 Beltana*.

Fate: KIA 12 Oct 1917, age 20yrs, Passchendaele, Ypres.

Cemetery: No known grave

Honour Boards: Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial, Belgium;
National War Museum, Canberra;
Obley War Memorial; & Cumnock War Memorial Gates.



Biography:

Leslie Cooper was born at “Derowie” Obley in 1897, the third of six children of George W Cooper of Obley, and his second wife, Elizabeth Grahame. George also had three children (including George Cooper junior) with his first wife Mary J Egan who died in 1890. George Cooper senior died aged 67 years, in 1906 at Derowie, Obley, having lived in the district for about 50 years.

Leslie played tennis in the years leading up to the War. He also played cricket for Obley schoolboys against Yeoval schoolboys in April 1910 when aged about 13 years. The Obley boys won comfortably, but three of their side— Leslie, nephew Harry, and David Gow (1746 – Pte, 45th Btn) were later to be killed in action in WW1. Leslie and David were to die within a day of each other at Passchendaele. Harold Edwards (2653 – Pte, 20th Btn, KIA 20 Nov 1915) of the Yeoval team was also to be a fatality of the War.

Leslie enlisted in the AIF on 20 Jan 1916, along with his nephew Harry (723 Corp Henry Fitzroy Cooper - 36th Btn), and other men from Yeoval— 708 Pte Arthur Oswald Brown; 1806 – Pte David Byrne; 893 Pte Tom West, KIA 21 Jan 1917— were all to become members of the 36th Battalion.

Leslie was only 18 years and 11 months old at the time and gave his occupation as “labourer”. His mother Elizabeth Cooper, Obley, was nominated as next of kin and signed his consent form because he was under 21 years of age. He was 5 feet 6¼ inches tall, had dark brown hair, blue eyes, a dark complexion and was of the church of England religious denomination.

The Dubbo Liberal & Macquarie Advocate – 21 Apr 1916, p5, reported that Leslie and Harry were entertained at a social in Obley during their final leave in April 1916. They were presented with a wristlet watch each by Mr J Whittaker on behalf of their friends. It was reported that Mr. Whittaker and others “*spoke very highly of the two lads*”, and “*wishing the lads success and hoping that they would return safely*”. After the presentations, “*dancing was resumed and kept going for a couple of hours longer (until about 3am), when farewells were said and a very pleasant evening ended*”

Les and Harry (along with David Byrne, Tom West and Arthur Brown) were driven to Molong in mid-April 1916 in the motor cars of Yeoval residents J. Miller and John Whittaker to catch the train back to camp. This was the last time Les and Harry were to see their home.

The 36th Btn sailed from Sydney on the *HMAT Beltana A70* bound for England on 13 May 1916. Pte Leslie Cooper and his mates spent about four months training on the Salisbury Plains in south west England before being sent to France on 22 Nov 1916.

The battalion was initially stationed in a relatedly quiet part of the Western Front near Armentieres in northern France, known as the “nursery sector”. Leslie was promoted to lance-corporal on 1 Apr 1917.

Pte Leslie Cooper was sent to hospital for a week with diarrhoea in late April 1917 but rejoined his battalion for their first battle, at Messines on 7 Jun 1917. "C" Company was on 'carrying' duties on the first day of the Messines battle (7 Jun 1917), moving supplies to the front line. Nephew Harry Cooper was killed on this day, leading one of the carrying parties.

The battalion relieved the 34th Btn on 9 June. The following day they stormed La Potterie Farm trenches, killing 80 Germans and taking 5 prisoners, despite heavy enemy shelling. This enabled the front line to be strengthened and prevented the enemy from re-constructing the trenches in this location. The battalion was relieved by the 1st Otago Btn on 13 June. Four officers, 66 other ranks and a basket of pigeons were killed during their stay on the front line.

The 36th Btn spent much of July 1917 in the front lines on Messines Ridge where it suffered regular heavy barrages from enemy artillery. Orders were made to hold the front line at all costs and no soldier was to fall back to another line. If the enemy obtained a footing in the front line, he was to be immediately counter-attacked. The battalion was to "vigorously patrol" no man's land to obtain intelligence, destroy enemy patrols and to bomb enemy posts. It also raided German strong points along Warneton Road on 22 Jul 1917. The battalion lost 3 officers and 41 other ranks in July (killed in action, died of wounds or missing).

Throughout August and September 1917, the 36th Btn rested and trained, mostly around Ledinghem in northern France. During this period, they finished a distant last in a cooking competition with the 3 other battalions of the 9th Brigade, enjoyed regular sports days, were inspected by Field -Marshall Haig, and some even tried fishing in the local river with grenades – much to the consternation of the commanding officer. War games were also undertaken with some battalions taking the role of German defenders.

In late September 1917, they marched 41 miles (66 km) to Winnezele in Belgium over 3 days. On the night of the 29 and 30 September they moved into the front line of the Zonnebeke sector, relieving the Royal Fusiliers.

The 36th Btn was held in reserve during the successful battle of Broodseinde Ridge on 4 October. The battalion's next major battle was the attack on Passchendaele on 12 Oct 1917. Heavy rain since early October had soaked the battlefield, and thick impassable mud made the progress of Leslie and his mates almost impossible. Men had to be pulled out of bog holes even before the battalion reached their starting point, and it sustained approximately 100 casualties while marching to the front line.

The battalion managed to secure its objective. However, other units had not been able to do so the battalion had to withdraw as "*casualties were piling up at an alarming rate*". Its flanks were exposed to enemy artillery and machine gun fire, and there was a lack of effective artillery support to destroy enemy machine gun posts. One of the few bright notes was that the ground was so soft that many enemy shells were relatively ineffective.

Like David Gow, who was killed at Passchendaele the following day, Leslie was a member of a Lewis gun team during the battle. They were sheltering in a shell hole to the right of Bellevue Ridge around noon when the whole team were directly hit and killed by an artillery shell. A colleague, Private Woods of "C" Company, reported to the Red Cross in June 1918 that Leslie "*was blown to pieces by a shell...I was near him at the time but he completely disappeared*". "C" Company had advanced about 400 metres at the time.

The 36th Btn had 43 soldiers killed in action during October 1917 (mostly on 12 October), but the horrendous conditions led to substantially more (61 soldiers) being missing. The battalion also had a further 346 soldiers wounded in action out of a total strength of around 856 soldiers.

Leslie's mother was officially informed in early December 1917 that he had been missing since 12 Oct 1917. She made enquiries to the AIF records department on 15 Feb 1918, providing a copy of a letter she received from one of Leslie's mates. A court of inquiry in early April 1918 confirmed that Leslie had been killed in action, although an investigating officer concluded earlier (on 25 Feb 1918) that there is "*nothing to prevent finding deceased*". His mother may not have been informed until May.

The Molong Express & Western District Advertiser – 11 May 1918, p10, stated: "*Lance-Corporal Leslie Cooper, of Obley, is reported as killed at the front. He was well-known and highly respected in the Obley district*".

Leslie's mother was granted his pension of £2 (\$4) per fortnight in March 1918. However, she received no personal effects from Leslie's kit. Elizabeth Cooper died on 14 Nov 1937 at Wellington, aged 74yrs.

Leslie Cooper has no known grave and is commemorated on the Menin Gate, Ypres, Belgium along with along with 54,895 other soldiers of the British Empire (including 6,197 Australians).

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Left: Obley War Memorial – Obley.
Right: Menin Memorial Gates, Ypres, Belgium.