



**CORPORAL HENRY FITZROY COOPER +
723 – 2nd Btn & ‘C’ Company, 36th Btn, AIF**

Born: 1893, Obley (Registered Molong)

Parents: George & Mary Jane Cooper, Obley

Occupation: Share farmer

District Connection: Obley, Yeoval, Cumnock.

Enlistment Date: 5 Nov 1916, Liverpool, Sydney.

Enlistment Age: 22yrs 8 mths

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

Fate: KIA 7 Jun 1917, Messines, Belgium – 23yrs

Buried: Strand Military Cemetery, Ploegsteert, Belgium.

Honour Boards: National War Museum, Canberra;
Obley War Memorial; Yeoval War Memorial; Wellington War
Memorial; & Cumnock War Memorial Gates.

Biography:

Henry Fitzroy Cooper (known as Harry) of Obley enlisted in the AIF on 20 January 1916, along with his uncle Leslie Cooper (son of George & Elizabeth Cooper), and friends Arthur Brown and David Byrne of Yeoval. He was 22 years old and single at the time, and gave his occupation as “sharefarmer”.

Harry was relatively short at 5 feet 4¼ inches (163 cm) and weighed only 138 pounds (63 kg). He had hazel eyes, brown hair, a dark complexion and was of the Church of England religious denomination. He was the fifth eldest child of George and Mary Jane (nee McIlveen) Cooper of “Derowie”, Obley with fifteen brothers and sisters.

Harry was a handy cricketer and a star tennis player before the war. The Obley tennis club formed in May 1912, and it was reported soon after that Harry remained undefeated at the club, and was the favourite to take out the gold medal in the first tournament held over many weeks. When the Obley tennis club was reformed in 1914, Harry was elected secretary and treasurer.

Harry was initially assigned to the 2nd Battalion, but was soon transferred to “C” Company of the newly formed 36th Battalion with his uncle Leslie (725), and Tom West (893), Arthur Brown (708), Earlon Comer (61) and David Byrne (1806) all of Yeoval. Although Harry enlisted at Liverpool, the 36th Battalion was based at the Broadmeadow Camp near Newcastle, and it is presumed he did most of his initial training there.

Harry and Les (with “*their three Yeoval comrades*”) were entertained at a social in Obley during their final leave in April 1916. The Cooper boys were presented with a wristlet watch each by Mr. J. Whittaker on behalf of their friends. It was reported that Mr. Whittaker “*spoke very highly of the two lads*”, while others also spoke at the farewell “*wishing the lads success and hoping that they would return safely*”.

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

(Molong Express & Western District Advertiser -29 Apr 1916, p8)

The 36th Battalion sailed for England from Sydney on the “*Beltana*” on 13 May 1916. A crowd of “between 7,000 and 8,000” gathered in Newcastle to farewell the battalion as it boarded a train to Sydney.

Harry and his mates disembarked at Plymouth on 9 Jul 1916, and spent the next four months training on the Salisbury Plains in south west England. One soldier described the massive training camp at Lark Hill as follows: *“extraordinarily fine stretches of green meadow land extending on all sides as far as the eye can see, dotted with tents and huts, with khaki-clad men moving to and fro in any direction you may look, in platoons or companies or battalions innumerable”*.



Harry's charge sheet had only one entry, and that was for being "absent without leave from afternoon parade" at Liverpool, NSW on 14 Feb 1916 with his good friend Tom West. Like Tom, he received a 10 shilling fine (\$1 - forfeit of 1 day's pay) and his general character was stated to be "good".

The 36th Battalion sailed for France on 22 Nov 1916, and moved into the trenches of the Western Front for the first time on 4 December, just in time for the onset of the terrible winter of 1916-17.

The battalion was stationed in a relatively quiet part of the Western Front near Armentieres in northern France, known as the "nursery sector". However, snipers, artillery shells and trench raids were a constant threat and Harry's mate Tom West was killed on 21 January 1917 soon after they reached France, by a shell burst during a German trench raid. Harry was injured in the same action, and was sent to the 2nd Australian Casualty Clearing Station near Steenwerck with a strained knee. He remained off duty for almost 3 weeks.

Harry was promoted to lance corporal on 1 March 1917, and to corporal on 31 May 1917.

The 36th battalion bided its time until the emphasis of the Allied operations switched to the Ypres sector of Belgium in mid-1917. On 7 June, the battle of Messines began, and Harry, his 36th Battalion and the whole 3rd Division took part in their first major battle.

The Battle of Messines was also notable as the first time that Australians and New Zealanders had fought alongside each other since the Gallipoli campaign. While it marked a reunion of old friends and neighbours, it was also the first time that unionist and nationalist soldiers from Ireland fought side by side. The aim of the battle was to capture the high ground of Messines Ridge only about 25 metres higher than the surrounding flat countryside. Large models of the battlefield were used so that the troops could familiarise themselves with the terrain and better understand the objectives.

Over the 2 years leading up to the battle, miners from Australia, Britain and Canada had built extensive tunnels beneath Flanders fields. In 25 locations, caverns under the enemy's front line were packed with up to 21 tonnes of explosive (ammonal).

At 3:10am on the 7 Jun 1917, twenty-one mines were simultaneously detonated, although two failed to detonate. The explosions were heard across the English Channel in London. It was the largest man-made explosion until the invention of the atomic bomb. An estimated 10,000 Germans were killed in the initial blasts, and the confusion and destruction enabled Allied soldiers to take the German frontline trenches with relative ease.

The details of the precise location of the two mines that failed to detonate were mislaid by the British following the war, to the discomfort of local townspeople. On 17 Jul 1955, lightning set one off, killing a cow, while another mine packed with explosive remains beneath Flanders fields.

The attack on 7 Jun 1917 was the most successful Allied offensive on the Western Front to that time. The role of the 36th Battalion on the first day of the Battle of Messines was limited to carrying supplies and ammunition to the front line approximately 1.5 kilometres south of Messines township, and otherwise being held in reserve. The carrying parties were subjected to intense artillery bombardment and machine gun fire, and lost 22 men killed in action on the first day of the battle. The headquarters of the 36th Battalion recorded that *“good reports continued to come in of the efficiency of our carrying parties and the determination with which they plodded through the enemy barrage time and again”*.

Harry Cooper led one of the carrying parties from Company “C” supporting the 34th Battalion on 7 Jun 1917 and was killed in action, probably by an artillery shell. He was initially buried behind the earthen paradoss protecting the rear of Anton’s Farm just north of Ploegsteert Wood. The cross on his grave (unlike many others) survived the war, and his body was later transferred to Strand Military Cemetery in Ploegsteert Wood.

The Wellington Times - 23 Jul 1917, p2, reported that Harry was *“highly respected in the Obley and Yeoval districts”*. Harry’s mother received a pension of £1 (\$2) per week in August 1917. The wrist watch presented to Harry in April 1916 was returned to his father exactly 2 years later.

Harry’s death obviously affected his family deeply. Memoriams appeared in local papers each year on the anniversary until at least 1922, with heart felt messages such as:

“A better son never lived, No one more true and kind, His equal in this weary world, We very rarely find”.

“Only a bundle of letters, That’s all that is left for me, But the hero who died for his country, Still lives in my memory. Only some lines from the trenches, With the hands of the writer grown cold, But the mother’s part is a broken heart, And a burden for lonely years”.

“Not marked by wooden cross, Maybe not marked at all. Just buried beneath the sod, Where his comrades saw him fall.”

723 Corporal Henry Fitzroy Cooper is featured in the book, *“Wellington’s Finest”* by Trevor Munro & Graeme Hoskin, 2005.

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Obley War Memorial – Obley.



Harry Cooper’s grave – Strand Cemetery