

**Private William Francis O'NEILL +  
2959 – 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 13-23 Reinforcements**

**Born:** 1896, Cargo, NSW.

**Parents:** Daniel & Lavinia O'Neill.

**Occupation:** Baker

**District Connection:** Cudal, Molong, Cumnock

**Enlistment Date:** 6 Apr 1916, Cumnock.

**Enlistment Age:** 19 yrs

**Embarkation:** 26 Oct 1916, Sydney,  
HMAT *Ascanius* A11

**Served:** France

**Fate:** KIA 3 May 1917, France, aged 20yrs.

**Honour Boards:** National War Museum, Canberra;  
Cumnock War Memorial Gates; Molong Honour  
Board, RSL Hall, Molong.

### Biography

William Francis O'Neill was born at Cargo in 1896, the son of Daniel and Lavinia (or Levinia) O'Neill (nee Morse). Daniel and Lavinia married in 1878 and had ten children, five sons and five daughters. They moved from Cargo to the property 'Glenview' at Cumnock around 1913.

Daniel O'Neill was a member of the Cumnock branch of the Farmers and Settlers' Association. He grew wheat at Yullundry in 1921 and *the National Advocate* (Bathurst) – 19 Apr 1923, p2, reported "Mr D O'Neill, of Cumnock, has successfully experimented with cotton-growing on a small scale, and is considering whether an area under cotton would not be payable in that district..." *The Molong Express & Western District Advertiser* – 31 Jan 1925, p4, reports him transferring his Cond. Lease 12/9, of 744 acres, in the parish of The Gap, county Gordon, to PA McKinnon.

William attended school at Cudal. In 1914, local newspapers reported him playing football (as a forward) for the Cumnock Junior team against neighbouring town teams. By 1915 he was playing for the Cumnock Seniors. *The Molong Express & Western District Advertiser* – 16 Jan 1915, p10, states that he was a member of the Cumnock Druid's Lodge.

William O'Neill enlisted at Cumnock on 1 Jun 1916 and medically examined by Dr Ivie Aird. He stated that his age was 19 yrs and 7 months, his occupation was a baker and that he had been an apprentice for 3 months at Lithgow. His next of kin was his mother, Lavinia O'Neil. He was medically re-examined at Dubbo on 7 Jun and was 5 feet 8¾ inches tall, had fair complexion, blue eyes, brown hair and was of the Roman Catholic religious denomination.

While training at a Bathurst camp, William was charged with two offences. The first offence on 29 August was for 'talking on parade' and the second for 'overstaying his leave' on 30 July 1916. He was cautioned for the first offence and received one day of being confined to barracks for the second offence. His charge sheet noted that his general character was 'good'.

*The Molong Argus* – 15 Sep 1916, p4: "On Monday last the parents of Pte W O'Neill received word from the military authorities to the effect that their son had been seriously injured by being stabbed in the back with a knife, and was lying in the Bathurst Hospital. On Monday last, Chas Henry Hall, 38 years, a horse dealer, was charged at the Bathurst Police Court with inflicting grievous bodily harm on William O'Neill. Hall was remanded." Chas. Henry Hall was subsequently sentenced to six months imprisonment in October 1916.

Pte William O'Neill sailed from Sydney on 25 Oct 1916 on HMAS *Ascanius* A11. Also on board was the 17 year old Pte Cecil Johnson from Cumnock of 54<sup>th</sup> Btn (Died of wounds 17 Nov 1917, Belgium). On 1 Nov 1916, he was charged with 'smoking below decks' on 31 Oct 1916 and awarded 14 days

detention. The troops disembarked at Devonport on 28 December 1916. The trip had been longer than usual as the *Ascanius* stayed in Capetown for five days and in Sierra Leone for fourteen days, a trip of over nine weeks.

Gunner Phillip W Tarlinton, 28059 5<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Bde, (RTA 21 Jul 1917 due to illness) wrote a letter about the journey which was published in the *Tweed Daily* – 16 Mar 1917, p2, and some extracts from it are: *“The run across from Australia to South Africa was devoid of any particular interest, except that we saw whales in astonishing numbers and that we were blessed with a remarkably smooth trip... “*

He described what activities the soldiers did on the ship as: *“Every conceivable kind of sport, compatible with the limited deck space available, has been provided for, such as tugs-o’-war, foot runnings, teams racing, boxing, single-sticks, cock-fighting, quoits, wrestling, etc, whilst musical competitions are held at night time, when prizes are awarded for vocal items, recitations, pianoforte and mouth-organ competitions. Added to these are the physical culture parades, three of one hour each every day, Sundays excepted... ”*

Of the ship’s stay in Capetown he wrote: *“We were aware that the transport would have to coal here so we looked forward to getting a few days’ leave... We were certainly taken off the transport and treated to long route marches; but at no time were we free from the thralldom of the King’s regulations. Nevertheless, we were enabled to get some idea of what Capetown and its inhabitants were like... ”*

*It is the 10<sup>th</sup> of December, which reminds me that is the 46<sup>th</sup> day of our voyage; and we are lying at anchor in the bay off Freetown, Sierra Leone, only about 8 degrees from the Equator. We have been held up here ten days now, and as I write there are no indications of us moving out and onward to old England. German submarines are said to be operating with some success off the Spanish coast; hence, we have to bide our time here until the Admiralty considers it safe for us to resume our voyage.”*

Phillip Tarlinton’s article ended there, but another letter by 1384 Pte Samuel Forster, 35<sup>th</sup> Btn, (KIA 25 May 1917), printed in the *Dungog Chronicle; Durham & Gloucester Advertiser* – 20 Mar 1917, p3, takes up the record of the trip of the *Ascanius* at Freetown, Sierra Leone:

*“Several days passed before we were allowed ashore. Then on a particularly hot day a small steam tug brought over several lighters, into which we slowly filed until they were completely filled. We were not long in reaching the wharves, which are small, and it was for that reason that the *Ascanius* was unable to steam into the wharf. We were dismissed, and were free to wander whither we will, but our time was limited. What a quaint town! The town is almost completely negro. Most of the trade, such as it is, is run by negroes, though there are a few Europeans in possession of the larger establishments... ”*

*After several more days waiting several transports, [the *Ascanius*] followed an auxiliary cruiser out of port, and soon we had left Freetown and Sierra Leone behind. In a few days the weather became cool. After leaving port we travelled in a dark ship, and wore life belts continually except at night when they were close by us for the rest of the voyage. When we reached more dangerous waters several destroyers, in addition to the cruiser, escorted us. At length on a cold, misty morning we sighted the shores of England. Destroyers in great numbers, and several mine sweepers escorted us into Devonport. Late at night we disembarked and were entrained to camp... We were glad to be on the land again, however, for a voyage of over nine weeks becomes very monotonous, especially when freedom of movement is curtailed for several days.”*

Pte O’Neill was stationed with the 14<sup>th</sup> Training Btn, Hurdcott after arrival. He was admitted to hospital on 24 Jan 1917 with Tonsillitis. He returned to Hurdcott, ten days later, on 2 Feb 1917. He proceeded overseas to France on 28 Feb 1917 and was stationed at Etaples until joining the 19<sup>th</sup> Btn on 23 Mar 1917, which at the time was stationed at Gréwillers, in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region of France. By the 30<sup>th</sup> of March the 10<sup>th</sup> Btn had relieved other battalions in the line and had moved onto Fricourt, in the Somme department in Picardie in Northern France. On 1 May they moved onto Noreuil and relieved the 28<sup>th</sup> Btn as support on the Hindenburg Line to the right of Bullecourt.

AIF Unit War Diaries 1914-1918 War, infantry, 23/36/16, 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry Btn, May 1917:

*“The 2<sup>nd</sup> May final arrangements were made for the 19<sup>th</sup> Btn as part of the Australian 1<sup>st</sup> Division, to join the attack on the Hindenburg Line in what was to be called the Second Bullecourt Battle.*

At zero hour of 03.45am on 3rd May the 19<sup>th</sup> formed up on the right flank of the attack and what followed was a huge disaster for the battalion. The Germans shelled the oncoming soldiers and those who survived the shelling and reached the wire were all bunched up and were then met by heavy machine gun fire. During the day time, it was impossible to get runners forward or back across No Man's Land, owing to the heavy machine gun fire; and owing to the great number of casualties among officers and other ranks, it was impossible to obtain clear statements as to what actually occurred in the attack.

Fourteen officers and about 550 ordinary ranks of the 19<sup>th</sup> Btn took part in the attack. The casualty figures after the attack was:

Killed - 5 Officers & 16 Ordinary Ranks

Wounded - 5 Officers & 216 OR

Missing - 2 Officers & 115 OR

Total Casualties - 12 Officers & 347 OR The 19<sup>th</sup> Btn was relieved the following morning, 4<sup>th</sup> May 1917."

Pte W O'Neill received his last pay in the field on 22 Apr 1917 and was reported 'Missing in Action' on 3 May 1917. It wasn't until after a Military Inquiry was held on the 11 Dec 1917, that he was declared as 'killed in action'.

*The Molong Argus* – 18 Jan 1918, p4, reported: **PTE. W. O'NEILL KILLED**

*"On Tuesday last the Rev. Father Lawler received word from the military authorities, Victoria Barracks, announcing that Private William O'Neill, son of Mr and Mrs O'Neill, of Cumnock, who was reported missing in May last, was killed in action on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1917, and asking the rev. gentleman to convey the sad news to the deceased soldier's parents. Father Lawler went out to the residence of the O'Neill family and delivered the message to the sorrow stricken mother, who, however, was somewhat prepared for the sad tidings, as a letter had been received from a comrade stating that he saw Private O'Neill fall..."*

It appears that one of William's brothers, James, was not giving up hope about the news as he advertised in *The Sun*, Sydney – 19 Mar 1918, p4: **Missing Since Bullecourt**

*"Mr James M. O'Neill, of Glenview, Cumnock, would be glad to hear from any returned soldier who could give him any news of his brother (No. 2959a, Private William O'Neill). He has been missing since May 3, 1917, at the battle of Bullecourt."*

A Red Cross Society Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau file has the following on William O'Neill, dated 4 Mar 1918, at Havre, from Pte J O'Neill, 297 – 19<sup>th</sup> Btn, A Coy, 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon.

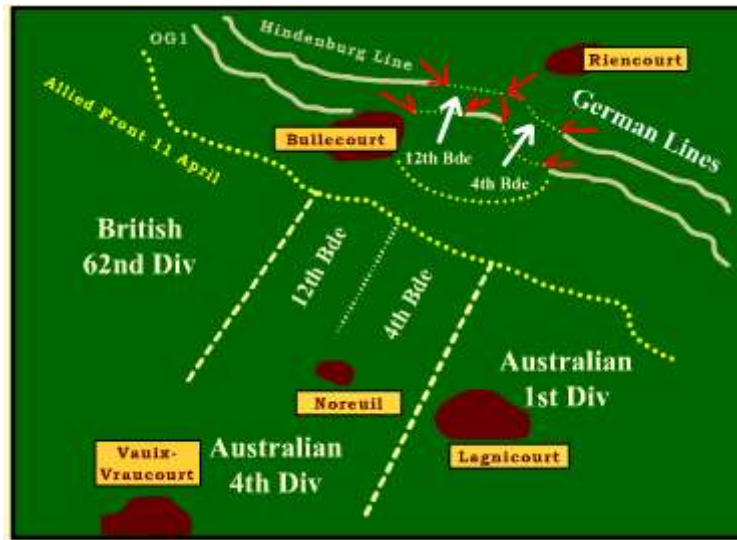
*"He was in A Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon. I was told by Private Sid. Arianson [156 Ariansen, Anton Sydney] when we were with the Battn at Bapaume, about May 5<sup>th</sup>, that he was with O'Neill at Bullecourt. They had gone over the top about 200 yards when a shell burst near O'Neill and he was hit in the chest. We did not carry out our objective on that occasion. A heavy bombardment was going on for days after... I knew O'Neill he was very tall, thick set, fair haired, with a moustache. Played football a bit."*

His father Daniel O'Neill received Pte William O'Neill's British War Medal and Victory Medal.

His brother, Pte Martin O'Neill, 6533 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Btn, was killed in action on 4 Oct 1917, in Belgium.

*The Molong Express & Western District Advertiser* – 10 Jan 1942, p4, state in an obituary of Lavinia O'Neill that she "was born at sea whilst her parents were coming to Australia from England. For many years the family had resided at Rockley. Lavinia later went to Cargo, where she married and lived on her husband's property, Edinboro Station. After a number of years, the family went into retirement and made Cudal their home town. Later on, however, they went on the land at Cumnock, finally retiring to Orange in 1922."

Lavinia O'Neill died at Orange in Jan 1942, aged 81 years. Her husband, Daniel O'Neill, died in 1940.



Second Bullecourt Battle 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1917.  
<http://www.anzacsinfrance.com/1917/>



Above: Molong RSL Club, 22-24 Riddell Street, Molong.



Left: Cumnock WW1 Honour Plaque

Below: Cumnock War Memorial Gates, 46 Obley Street, Cumnock.

