



SAPPER CLARENCE WILLIAM WILKIN 5210 – 1st TUNNELLING COMPANY

Born: 21 Jun 1892, Obley, NSW.

Parents: Francis and Elizabeth Wilkin

Occupation: Blacksmith

District Connection: Obley, Yeoval

Enlistment Date: 26 Oct 1915, Dubbo.

Enlistment Age: 23yrs 4 mths.

Embarkation: 19 Jul 1916, Melbourne

HMAT A26 *Armadale*

Served: France, Belgium.

Fate: RTA 11 Jun 1919

Honour Boards: Cumnock, Obley, Wellington & Yeoval War Memorials.

Biography

Clarence William Wilkin was born on 21 Jun 1892 in Obley, NSW, the son of Francis George Wilkin and Elizabeth (nee Bennett) Wilkin. Clarence was the youngest of six children (one sister, Ellen, and four brothers, Arthur, Francis, Herbert and Alfred) from this marriage.

Clarence's father, Francis Wilkin, was from Drysdale, Victoria, where he learnt the trades of blacksmith, wheelwright and engineering. He moved to Obley in 1892 to set up as a blacksmith. Obley was a thriving mining village from the 1890s to the 1920s, but now no longer exists as a township. Francis also kept the hotel and store there, and in 1909, bought land near Obley. His wife Elizabeth died in 1894, aged 36yrs. Francis remarried Mary (Mollie) Cavanagh in 1896. They had two children – Walter and John. Francis Wilkin died on 4 Dec 1914 at his property, 'Trafalgar'. Mary Wilkin died in Sep 1915.

Arthur, Herbert and Clarence learnt the Blacksmith trade after finishing their schooling at Obley. The Wilkin brothers were lively lads and Clarence, Herbert and Alfred, along with several other local lads, were reported in the Wellington Times on 13 Jan 1910, P4, as being fined for '*riotous behaviour*' in Obley on 27 Nov 1909.

Clarence, aged 23yrs and 4mths, enlisted at Dubbo in the AIF on 26 Oct 1915. He was single and gave his occupation and address as a blacksmith at Obley. His next of kin was Mrs Lila Wilkin, Trangie, wife of his brother, Francis. He was 5ft, 5½ inches tall, of medium complexion, had grey eyes and dark brown hair. He was of the Church of England religious denomination.

The Molong Argus 23 July 1915, P5 of the Cumnock news, reports:

"On Wednesday evening the following local and district residents proceeded through Molong to Sydney for the purpose of enlisting: - T and B Coady, Obley; Harold Sparks, Yeoval; Ernie Merriman, Cumnock; Clarie [Clarence] Wilkin, Obley; and Harold Edwards, Obley."

Clarence was attached to A Coy, 46th Btn on enlistment but was transferred to the Miners Reinforcements at Seymour, Victoria, on 10 May 1916. He was promoted to Lance Corporal on 18 Jul 1916. He embarked from Melbourne on HMAT A26 *Armadale* on 19 Jul 1916 and was promoted to Corporal on 29 Jul 1916 for the voyage only. The *Armadale* arrived in Durban, South Africa on 15 Aug and leave was granted from 11am-11pm, and departed Durban on 16 Aug.

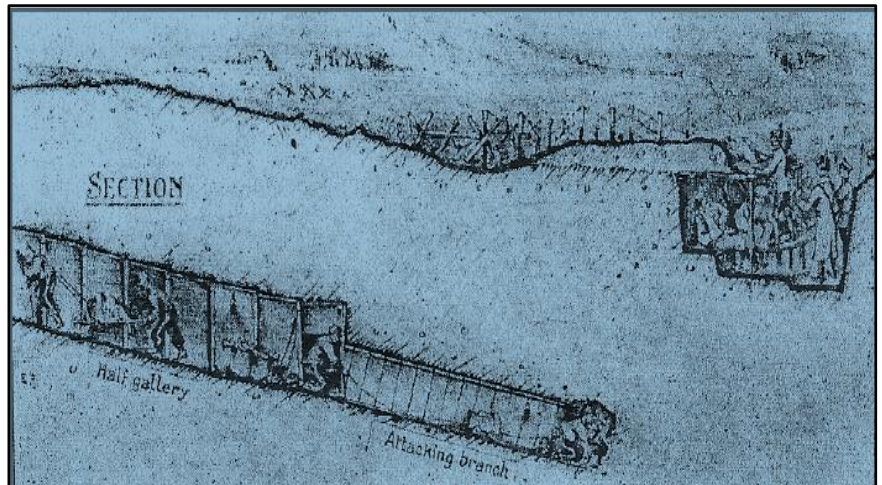
The *Armadale* arrived in Capetown on 20 Aug, where there was a Route March for three hours and then leave was granted from 11am-11pm. When the *Armadale* departed at 5pm the next day, ten tunnellers were left behind. One of these was Clarence Wilkin. On 21 Aug he was reported as absent from embarkment and demoted to the permanent rank of Sapper. He left Capetown on HMAT *Orsova*. A67 on 24 Aug 1916.

Sapper Wilkin disembarked in England on 14 Sep 1916 and marched to No 3 camp, Parkhouse, Salisbury on 21 Sep 1916. He proceeded to France on 15 Oct 1916.

In Oct 1916 the 1ATC was mining on Hill 63 and working on dugouts at Bailleul, north-west of Armentières. On 3 Nov 1916, the 1ATC had moved to Ridge Camp near the military rest town of Poperinghe, west of Ypres. The company began work on establishing dugouts at Lille Gate and mining at Hill 60. By this time Hill 60 had been in German control for 19 months and was a heavily contested and dangerous location.

During its tour of duty at Hill 60, the soldiers of 1ATC worked two 6 hr shifts per day for four consecutive days, while the other half rested and trained at Ridge Camp Headquarters outside Poperinghe. The 1ATC set about improving the drainage and ventilation in the existing galleries, as well as guarding it. Within days of its arrival the company experienced its first fatalities at Hill 60 from mortars or shellfire.

On 27 Nov 1916 Sapper Wilkin was admitted with Influenza to the 26th General Hospital at Étaples, Picardy, France. He was transferred to No.5 Convalescent Depot at Cayeaux-en-Santerre, Picardie, on 8 Dec, and returned to the 1ATC on 28 Dec 1916.



Example of a basic tunnel (Sap) used during WW1. Each side dug main tunnels with branches leading under enemy lines. The end result was to blow a mine below ground to cause maximum damage to enemy personnel and infrastructure.

The winter that year was particularly severe, with Jan and Feb seeing freezing conditions. German mortar attacks continued causing many casualties in the shallow tunnel systems. The 1ATC was digging additional galleries and dugouts for 16 officers and 300 infantry in the Larch Wood complex, just behind Hill 60.

Sapper Wilkin was hospitalised with pyrexia (fever) from the field on 2 Mar 1917 and rejoined his unit on 5 Mar, only to return to hospital with influenza on 11 Mar. He was discharged to rejoin 1ATC on 2 Apr. On 9 Apr the Germans launched a successful raid on Hill 60, in which the British 23rd Division had 278 casualties, of whom 58 were listed as missing.

During the later part of April, both Hill 60 and the Caterpillar were experiencing daily constant bombardment from German shell fire. On 25 Apr, an explosion occurred in Trench 39, killing 3 officers and 6 sappers. By the end of the day other casualties included 4 officers and 25 other ranks who had been gassed, some severely.

May 1917 was a month for consolidation for 1 ATC. At Hill 60 they continued driving the new deep Brisbane, Newcastle and Adelaide galleries while nervously guarding the great mines below the surface. The mines were scheduled to be blown on 7 Jun 1917 before an attack of the Messines Ridge.

At 3.10am on 7 June, Captain Oliver Woodward of the 1ATC, detonated the two great mines under Hill 60 and the Caterpillar. A total of nineteen mines below the Messines Ridge were detonated – the resulting blast creating one of the largest explosions in history. It demolished a large part of Hill 60 and killed around 10,000 German Soldiers. The British, Australian and New Zealand infantry then advanced behind an artillery bombardment and reached all their objectives within the first hour of the battle of Messines.

On the 13 June the 1ATC were transferred to Dranoutre, Belgium, repairing, building and maintaining roads and dugouts in the Messines/Wytschaete area, just south of the Ypres battle zone. Some of the men were rested at a camp near St Omer. The work was difficult and with a constant risk of being killed or wounded.

In Sep 1913, some of the 1ATC were sent to the Ypres salient to construct a headquarters and lay plank roads in preparation for the Battle of Menin Road. The battle commenced on 20 Sep and sappers from the 1ATC advanced with the 1st & 2nd Australian Divisions to examine and repair captured concrete pillboxes

and dugouts. Members of 1ATC were also engaged in repairing a forward command and first aid posts at The Butte after the Battle of Polygon Wood which began on 26 Sep.

Throughout October work continued on repairing the roads along the Menin Road and the 1ATC had a number of soldiers killed and wounded from constant German artillery bombardment and the use of mustard gas. November brought in another cold winter, but not as severe as the previous year, and the work of the 1ATC carried on from Dranoutre.

During the first half of 1918, 1ATC continued construction and repair work of a number of dugout systems in the now-expanded Ypres salient. March heralded in spring, but for the soldiers on the Western Front it meant the start of another round of bloody battles. The Germans increased the use of gas shells on the Ypres front and on 12 Mar over 60 soldiers suffered from the effects of mustard gas poisoning, but had no fatalities. On 26 Mar the 1ATC left its camp headquarters at Dranoutre to relocate in the town of Saulty, in the British third army sector. The company was tasked to dig a defensive front line trench, and then moved onto dugout and machine-gun post construction.

On 14 May 1918 Sapper Wilkin again reported sick with an abscess of the face and was transferred to hospital at Étapes on 15 May. On 24 Jun he was transferred from Havre to a hospital at Rouelles with pyrexia of unknown origin and rejoined his unit on 2 Jul 1918. Sections of the 1ATC were then spread out constructing artillery dugouts between Querrieu and Bussy-Les-Daours, near Amiens.

In Aug 1918, the 1ATC were working alongside the 2ATC and American troops keeping roads open and rendering safe booby traps and mines in and around the villages west of Bellicourt, on the Hindenburg Line.



Example of a sleeping dugout built and used by the Australian Tunnelling Companies, WW1.

They were directly exposed to German artillery, gun fire and gas shells.

Sapper Wilkin had leave from 28 Aug – 13 Sep 1918, and dental treatment at hospital on 9/10 Oct 1918. On 9 Dec 1918, while on active service (WOAS) he was charged with being absence without leave (AWL) from 3pm 26 Nov to 12 noon 28 Nov (45hrs). He received 9 days forfeit pay and 14 days confined to barracks.

He reported to hospital on 17 Dec 1918 and after treatment in various hospitals, was transferred to England for treatment of V.D. at the

1st Australian Dermatological Hospital, Bulford, England on 15 Jan 1919. He was stationed at Parkhouse on 14 Feb 1919. He returned to Australia on HMAT A36 *Boonah*, departing England on 25 Apr 1919, and arrived in Australia on 11 Jun 1919. He was discharged on 26 Jul 1919. Sapper Clarence Wilkin received the 1914/15 Star, the British War, and the Victory medals. He is honoured on the Obley War Memorial and the Cumnock War Memorial Gates.

Clarence Wilkin, then living at Yeoval, married Isabella Maude Burton of Obley on 16 Jul 1921 at St Patrick's Presbytery, Wellington. They had a number of children. One son, Francis William Wilkin, died from illness on 19 Jan 1937, aged 11 months. In the NSW Electoral Rolls the couple are listed as living at Yeoval where Clarence worked as a labourer, from 1930-1949.

The Wellington Times, 8 Dec 1938, P6 has this report on Clarence:

"On Tuesday afternoon, whilst Clarence Wilkin, of Yeoval, was working on the roof of a building at Yeoval, he slipped and fell onto a concrete floor from which he received severe injuries to the side. After receiving medical attention from the doctor at Yeoval he was conveyed by ambulance to the Wellington District Hospital, where he admitted for further treatment."

In 1949 the NSW Electoral Rolls shows that Clarence and Isabella had moved to 2 Garners Avenue, Marrickville, with Clarence's occupation listed as a blacksmith. In 1958 -1977 they are listed as living at 7 Chadderton Street, Werriwa, Cabramatta. Isabel died on 22 Nov 1977 aged 76yrs. Clarence Wilkin died on 15 Sep 1978 aged 86yrs and has a memorial plaque, along with one of his wife, on Francis Wilkin's grave, at the Yeoval Cemetery.



Two of Clarence's brothers also served in WW1:

7052 Pte Francis James WILKIN, Blacksmith, enlisted in the AIF at Dubbo on 23 Jan 1916, at 31yrs of age. His NOK was his wife, Lila, of Trangie. He embarked on HMAT A24 *Benalla* on 9 Nov 1916 as a member of the 2nd Btn, 23rd Reinforcements. He was wounded in action in France from a gas shell on 23 Mar 1918 and returned to Australia on 1 May 1919.

18290 Pte Walter Claude WILKIN, labourer, enlisted at Dubbo on 14 Jan 1916, aged 18yrs old. NOK was his brother Jack Wilkin, Yeoval. He was a member of the 54th Btn but was discharged from the AIF at Bathurst on 6 Jun 1916 as being medically unfit due to muscular disability of the left leg.

Research Sources:

- . Australian War Memorial – www.awm.gov.au
- . National Archives of Australia - www.naa.gov.au
- . 'Crumps & Camouflets' by Damien Finlayson, 2010 – History of the Australian Tunnelling Coys.
- . Australian Tunnellers WW1 website – www.tunnellers.net
- . 'Wellington's Finest' by Trevor Munro & Graeme Hosken, 2005.

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*The Overlander Hotel & Wilkins General Store, Obley, 1910-1920.
Photo from the Obley Information booth near the Obley War Memorial.*

Obley War Memorial, Obley, NSW, 2015.

